HER KNIGHT COMES RIDING

JOHN V. A. WEAVER

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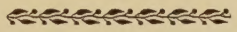
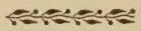


"Don't you ever try to go there.
It's to dream of not to find.
Lovely things like that is always
Mostly in your mind."

"LEGEND"—*from* FINDERS

BY

John V. A. Weaver



IN AMERICAN : *Poems*
1921

FINDERS :
More Poems in American
1923

MORE IN AMERICAN
1926

TO YOUTH
1928

HER KNIGHT COMES RIDING

John V. A. Weaver

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To
Anne Tate Weaver
and
Randalph Tate Weaver

Prologue

PROLOGUE

THE OLD GILT CLOCK on the mantel wheezed through seven melancholy strokes. Mrs. Williams looked up from her sewing, and glared at the dishes still laid out in a "place" upon the yellow-oak table.

She made a noise, somewhat in the nature of a vexed grunt, as she frowned in the direction of her small daughter, who lay sprawled upon the floor, stomach-downward, her long yellow curls touching the pages of a large illustrated book. The child exhibited her absorption in her perusal, by a thin, monotonous buzzing sound, made by baring the teeth and groaning gently.

"For Heaven's sake, Fanny—will you stop that noise?" she said sharply. "How many times I got to tell you you'll drive me crazy?"

Fanny ceased the noise abruptly, continued staring at the page and then, when quick annoyed stitches assured her that Ma was back at work, she scowled up slightly defiantly, and began to substitute for vocal fidgeting a rhythmic kicking of the carpet with her toes.

The two gas-jets flickered. This was the period in the early years of the century, before fairly universal electricity came to the aid of respectable but economical house-wives of the lower middle classes. Pa made fair wages as a carpenter, but Mrs. Williams took on sundry odd jobs of sewing to help out. The wavering of the light added to her numerous

other causes for nervousness, and the strokes of her needle became almost savage. Why didn't Tom come home? His dinner would be ruined, absolutely ruined. A lot he cared, though. He'd be stuffed with free lunch, and smelling like a bar-rag. Every time they had one of those quarrels, he did this. She nagged him, did she? Call that nagging—just suggesting that he have cases of beer sent to the house, instead of him lopping around that darned saloon? And then one word leading to another, and her begging him not to talk that way in front of the kids—how could she make them behave, when he used such language to her? Especially Fanny. Always siding with her Pa. Ganging up, those two—Pa and Fanny against Ma and Fred. Cutting her out of her own daughter's life like that. And acting up. And probably come rolling in after midnight. Nice pork chops all spoiled. A lot of thanks anybody got for trying to keep a decent home. And it was decent—clean and neat, you'd think they had twice as much money, instead of having to scrimp and scrape, with Tom blowing in four or five dollars every time he got on one of these sore spells—

Fanny's thumping of the carpet with her toes became crescendo. She added to it once more the buzzing. Ma leaned from her rocking-chair quickly, and put her hand, not roughly, but firmly, upon her daughter's shoulder.

"Now!" she said. "For the last time. Either you stop that noise or either you march right straight to bed!"

The child flinched, and sat up.

"Don't jump that way!" Ma remonstrated. "Nobody's goin' to beat you! My Lord, you ack like I was goin' to hit you with a club. Quit kickin' your toes, and quit that buzzin', and look at your book nice. Else you'll have to go to bed."

Fanny, reassured, tried a mild impudence. "Why?" she

hazarded, fully aware of the monosyllable's annoying capacities.

Ma looked at her. "'Why'— 'Why'— I certainly am sick of that word! Because I'm tryin' to work, that's why. And that noise is awful."

Fanny glanced defiantly at Ma. "Pa lets me make noises when I want to."

Ma spoke through compressed lips. "All right. That's fine. But I'm not your Pa, and I don't let you. Now, you goin' to keep quiet?"

Fanny answered with calculated obliquity, "Ain't Pa comin' home at all?"

Ma frowned. "Course he is. Don't ast such silly questions."

"But he was awful mad, Ma! He said—"

"He was just talkin', as usual. Now, don't bother me, I got to finish this dress before to-morrow mornin'."

"Is it for the snippy lady on Clinton Street?"

With elaborate patience, Ma replied, "Yes, it is. Now, is that all? Honest, for a seven-year-old girl,—it's time you was in bed, anyways."

Fanny perceived the limit of patience approaching; so, discontented but defeated she went back to her book. There was silence in the sad little Brooklyn general-room for perhaps eight minutes, while the needle flew methodically. But Fanny could not hold the good behavior long. Soon she looked up at Ma, troubled, and studied the faded face. She decided Ma wasn't really mean—just worried. She felt sorry for her, lots of times. If only she wasn't so cross. Finally, timidly she essayed another question.

"Ma?"

No answer. But puzzlement forced her on. Things were

so funny. She really wanted to know. She repeated, very gently and in her mildest tones. "Ma—please, Ma. Why don't you love Pa?"

Startled, Ma gazed at her daughter with wide eyes. "Well —what a question!" she said slowly.

Bravely Fanny gulped and reiterated, "Why, Ma?"

Ma rose swiftly to her feet, and talked rapidly. "That settles it. 'Why—why—why?'—I warned you. Up, now—get up. You're goin' to bed."

Fanny shrank back, protesting loudly, "Aw, no! You promised! You let Fred go over to see Frankie Ralston, and you promised I could stay up till he got back! You promised, Ma!"

"Fred's a good boy. He behaves when I tell him somethin'. Up, now!"

Fannie scrambled out of reach, on hands and knees. "But you prom—"

Ma's fortitude broke. Slightly hysterically, she cried, "Shut up! Ain't I got enough with your Pa goin' on this way, and me worked to the bone, without you actin' all the time like a wild monkey? Do you want to drive me out of my senses? Ain't you got no heart?"

So earnestly and frantically did she address the child that Fanny was deeply impressed. Awed, she blurted, "I— I'm sorry, Ma—I—"

A cracked note was in Ma's voice. "I don't like to jump on you this way! Only you just try to see how far you can go—"

Fanny crept back to her book, and silently lay down over it again, not daring to look up. Ma relented, sat down in her chair with a heavy sigh, and took up her sewing. Out of the tail of her eye she observed that Fanny had dropped her face to the book, and was whimpering, trying to do so without

noise. Ma endeavored to ignore this demonstration, but in a moment she leaned toward the child, and with an unaccustomed gentleness, said, "There, now, Fanny. What *is* the matter?"

Fanny spoke from her arm, muffled, "You're—you're always so cross."

Ma sighed again, then reached and pulled the girl toward her, clucking with her tongue. "Tt-tt. Here." She wiped Fanny's eyes with her handkerchief. "You mustn't make me cross. You know how busy I am, and your Pa, drinkin', the good-for-nothin'—," she checked herself, and resumed, quite pathetically. "Why can't you keep quiet, and not try me so?"

Fanny pressed her face against her mother's knee. "I'm—I'm lonesome."

"Lonesome? How can you be lonesome?"

Fanny rubbed her nose into the musty dress. "I want somebody to tell me stories. Like Pa."

Ma shook her head. "I ain't any good at such truck. They's plenty of stories in your book."

"But I'm tired of the pitchers. And I can't make out the long words. Besides, Pa makes up nicer stories than the ones in the book. He takes the pitchers and makes up new stories about 'em. All about knights and dragons and fairies—"

Ma interrupted with a grim shake of the head. "Yeh—he always was good at fairy-tales. Trash!"

Fanny protested solemnly. "They ain't trash, Ma! They're wunnaful! And then other times he tells me about when he was a sailor, and all the wunnaful places he sailed to. He says that was the life, he says, and lots of times he wished he was still a sailor."

Ma nodded bitterly. "Uh-huh. And never met me and tried

to be the bum carpenter he is. Well, they's others wishes it. Never mind. Go on. Does he—does he ever say anything about me?"

Fanny thought hard. "Well—he says the other night, he says you used to be real pretty, and you had such pretty hands—like a princess!"

Ma looked disdainfully down at her calloused fingers, and shrugged her shoulders.

"And he says—" continued the child, "he says you always used to say he was good-lookin', too."

Ma turned her head, muttering, "He was, all right. Worse luck."

Fanny became even more solemn. "But I think he's good-lookin' now! Why, he's the beautifullest man in the whole world!"

"Beautiful is as beautiful does."

"He *is* beautiful! He's so straight and big, and his hair—that's what I love." She paused for encouragement; finding none, she elaborated, "the way it's nice and black on top, and so white and soft by his ears."

Ma, reflecting upon the completely muddy gray of her own hair, pursed her lips, and said nothing.

The child sat entranced with the vision of her father that her phrases conjured up. Then, wrinkling her forehead, she asked, "Ma. Ain't Pa really a good carpenter?"

"Nothin' extra." Ma returned to her sewing, not so absorbedly now, however, that she could not keep up her end of this, to her, rather tiresome dialogue.

Fanny figured out aloud her excuse for this imperfection in her idol: "He says he ain't a good carpenter, too. He says he was a good sailor, though. I guess he liked to be a sailor,

and he don't like to be a carpenter. I guess that's why he ain't a good carpenter."

Ma made a noncommittal noise.

"Ma. Do you think maybe I can go someday and see all those wunnaful places, like Pa?"

"If you get three square meals a day without havin' to break your neck workin', you'll be lucky." Ma bit off the end of a thread.

"Pa says maybe when I grow up they'll have girl sailors."

"He's just foolin'. They don't have any sailors any more, hardly."

"Wh—" Fanny checked herself from the forbidden "why," when her mother glanced sharply at her. "Oh!" she said; then to cover the lapse, rushed ahead: "Pa don't say I got to work. He says I'm a little Princess. And some day a knight is goin' to come ridin' up, and carry me off."

The woman smiled, "A knight! Huh! A policeman, you mean!"

"Oh, no! A knight—all dressed up in armor, like the pitchers. A knight on a milk-white steed!"

Ma watched her daughter sitting entranced by the idea. That lovely gold hair—there was some justification for the comparison with a princess, at that. Awkwardly she reached over and attempted a pat or two upon the curls.

Fanny looked up at the unexpected caress, and grew increasingly confidential. "Ma—I know where they's a knight on a milk-white steed."

"You don't say so!" Ma could not withhold the note of sarcasm from her voice. "A real live knight, hey? Where?"

But the child sensed satire, and squirmed slightly. "Oh—

Pa takes me over to see him. Over on Montague Street, where you can see the river, and New York."

Ma sniffed. "What's he look like?"

But Fanny, perceiving little true sympathy, withdrew from revelation and evaded with another squirm, and a muttered, "It's a secret." She turned over the leaves of the book, and studied one particular picture in silent solemnity. This pleased Ma just as well, and for all of five minutes she was able to sew with quick efficiency. She only half-heard Fanny's eventual interruption.

"Ma. I think Pa's a knight."

Absently, the woman said, "Yes, sure. A night out."

Such facetiousness was utterly lost upon the single-minded child, who insisted, "He *is* a knight. He's strong, and brave, and beautiful. And when I grow up, he's goin' to carry me *away* with him, on his steed!" She paused, then added in triumph, "And I'm goin' to marry him!"

Ma let her sewing fall to her lap. "That's him, all right —tellin' you such fool things!"

Fanny leaped to earnest defense. "He didn't tell me! I just know it, that's all! I won't marry anybody else!"

"Marry your Pa!" the woman repeated. "Here—lemme feel your head. Maybe you got a little fever."

But Fanny leaped up in defiance. "I love him!" she cried. "They couldn't be anybody else that would look like him, with the nice white hair by his ears! I love him, and I'm goin' to marry him, and he's goin' to be my knight!"

Ma stood up, captured the wriggling child by one arm, and laid her hand on the forehead. "No—I guess it ain't that. You must be just tired out. All right—beddie-byes!"

"I'm goin' to marry him!" Fanny stated again.

The woman could not repress a hard smile, as she re-

plied, "All right, then. Have it your own way. Better luck with him than I had, is what I says. Come on, now, Beddie-byes. Off with them shoes."

Fanny began to whine. "Aw—no! Fred ain't home yet. You promised!"

"It's ha-past seven, and that's the end of it." She leaned over, and pulled at the tiny shoe-string.

Fanny danced with discontent. "I want to wait for Pa!"

"That's enough! Gimme your other foot. They's no tellin' when he's comin', and you're goin' to bed this minute!"

Fanny's whine increased as the second shoe was removed with force. "But I can't sleep if Pa don't put me to bed! I can't sleep!"

Ma gave her a small shake. "That's the silliest thing yet! Can't sleep!"

The whine was now forte. "But I *can't!* I just *haf* to have him put me to bed! It makes me sleepy when he picks me up and carries me—"

Ma wrenched one stocking from the little leg. "Now stop it, this minute. I ain't goin' to go through this again. You been goin' to bed yourself all week, and I ain't goin' to have a bit more of this foolishness. Here, I'll carry you, if that's what you got to have."

Fanny's protest became violent. "Naw! You don't do it right! You don't pick me up nice, and throw me, like him. And then he says, 'All right, Fan-tan! All right, Fan-tan—' "

Ma gave vent to a harsh guffaw, as she jerked the other stocking free. "Fan-tan! Oh, Lord! Now listen to me. You jump out of the rest of them clo'es, and be in bed when I come back from the kitchen, or I'll Fan-tan you good and proper. Hear me?"

So saying, she snatched the dishes from the table, kicked the chair to one side, and walked with clicking heels out to the kitchen.

Fanny, scowling, got into her plain night-gown. Then, as she did not hear returning footsteps, stealthily she pattered to the hideous oak side-board. Immense anticipation gave place to growing disappointment as she searched under the piece of furniture, and found nothing but dust. She was upon the verge of tears when Ma, coming back briskly, uttering, "Fan-tan—huh!" greeted discovery of the protruding bare feet with a harsh, "Here! What are you rootin' around there for?"

Fanny answered in an anguished voice, "My knights!"

Ma crossed rapidly, seized one foot, and pulled. "Knights? What are you talkin' about—knights? Come out of there and get in that bed!" She hauled the struggling little form abruptly out.

Fanny's smudged face trembled with unhappiness. "My knights! The ones we was cuttin' out of the papers! I want my knights!"

Ma grasped her elbows. "So you're the one that's been litterin' up under the side-board with that trash! Anh-hanh! And I thought it was Fred!"

Fanny's face curdled. "I want my knights. Pa brought 'em to me. We was goin' to make a scrap-book! I got to take 'em to bed with me!"

Ma picked Fanny up, and started toward the bedroom. There was no kindness in her voice as she said, "I threw 'em out. I'm not goin' to have this place lookin' like a rat's nest!"

The storm broke. Fanny wept violently. "I want my knights! Pa brought 'em to me!"

Ma's nerves gave way. "Shut up! Now you stop that bawlin', or I'll give you somethin' to bawl about!"

Fanny by now was writhing in her mother's arms. Neither of them heard a loud knock on the outside door. Fanny's wail rose higher. "But Pa—"

In an ecstasy of indignation, Ma raised her hand. "Pa! Pa! Pa! I'm sick and tired of it! The lazy, good-for-nothing souse! Now, will you shut up?"

Fanny opened her mouth wide in a howl which drowned a new knock on the door, louder this time.

Smack! Ma's hand descended in a round slap.

Fanny yelped. Ma drew her hand back for thorough punishment, when her ear caught the reverberation of the knocking. Hastily she deposited the child upon the floor, and went furiously to the door, which she flung open.

The perturbed face of Mrs. Andrews, her neighbor across the hall, startled her into calmness.

"It's the 'phone, Miz Williams," said Mrs. Andrews in a scared voice. "It's—it's—well—you better go yourself."

Ma turned toward the child, who was blubbering in a heap on the floor. "Go to bed this second. March!" Then she followed her neighbor to the hall 'phone.

Fanny sensed something important and grave. Her weeping calmed to whimpers. On hands and knees she crawled to the door and listened.

Her mother's voice was saying into the transmitter, "Hello, yes. Yes, it's Miz Williams. Yes! What! . . . Mister Williams! What! Say that again!—"

She saw in the dimness the woman's figure become suddenly rigid.

"What? What—are you sure? Sure?—" Her mother

clutched the 'phone-box, clung to it. But her voice was firm as she finished, "Yes, I'll come right over."

And now she was frightened and silent, letting the tears roll unblinking down her face as Ma came back, staring straight before her, her jaws working. Ma stood beside her, and that awful, hard look grew stonier. She was afraid to ask Ma any question.

When her mother finally spoke, it was with a quavering gentleness, "Come on, dear." She gathered Fanny in her arms, holding her tight. "I got to go out."

Through Fanny ran an icy current of fear. "Pa—" she managed to get out.

Her mother kissed her cheek quickly, moving toward the bedroom. "Get a good sleep, now. Tell Fred to go right to bed the minute he gets in."

Fanny trembled. "But Ma—what's the matter?"

Ma did not answer. She deposited Fanny in her bed, and smoothed the covers with a shaking hand.

"Mrs. Andrews will come in and take care of you if you want anything."

The door closed. Fanny lay in the darkness. She heard the outer door click to.

Sobs overwhelmed her.

Part One

I

THE DEATH OF Fanny's father might easily have been a serious crisis. Influenced as she was by him, in such close relationship, there was a possibility that the street car which crushed out his entity might also damage her irreparably. But Fanny survived.

There was the shock of the news; the two days of numb scurrying about, trying to "help" in meaningless, trivial ways; the ghastly pageant of the funeral, when the morphine of curiosity deadened the pain.

Then that last glimpse of Pa's waxen face, miraculously unspoiled by the wheels; the little patch of white glowing above the smooth temple, a portion of a cameo inextinguishably stamped upon her brain.

And finally the devastating slither of the box upon the ropes.

Never to smooth that rough cheek again; never to tangle fingers in the patch of white; never to burrow a sleepy forehead into the warm, sweaty, tobacco-laden stuff upon the firm shoulder; never more to be exalted and soothed by the rich voice, telling of far-off lands and strange peoples, of fairies, and princesses and knights on dancing chargers. . . . "Go to sleep, Fan-tan. . . ."

Something temporarily cracked within the child.

But the days flowed into weeks, into months, into years. And the molecules of her entity rearranged themselves into a pattern. She became a meaning once more.

Pa was gone.

Nevertheless, she remained "Pa's girl."

2

They did not move from the flat in the semi-slums of Brooklyn. The three thousand dollars of insurance—Pa's one really methodical contribution, which, it is true, Ma's unremitting nagging had preserved—kept them in sufficient affluence until Ma's hitherto casual dressmaking could be developed into a business. There was more room about the place. One less mouth to cook for. Ma was clever with her sewing, and increasingly industrious, now that responsibility was full upon her. She acquired a more than sufficient list of steady customers. She fitted and sewed, and became grimly tranquil in methodical monotony.

Toward Fanny she maintained an attitude of care and effort. She was a good mother. She dressed the child neatly, she enforced a wise discipline and imparted all the instruction of which she was capable. From time to time she made awkward gestures of affection toward this pretty little stranger. But a stranger, fundamentally, the child remained.

Too deep was implanted the hostility which arose from the knowledge that "Ma hadn't really loved Pa"—a knowledge never afterwards expressed in spoken words, but always lurking. Resolutely, with a cruelty she could not have

realized, Fanny looked away from the yearning that came, at unexpected moments, into her mother's eyes. She submitted to fumbling caresses. She even, from a vague sense of fitness, tried to return some of them. But ever there was an insincerity, a lack of conviction. She recognized the woman's thoughtfulness, her gruff kindness, and she responded by obeying implicitly. Above all, she appreciated the stern justice which prevented her mother from favoring Fred.

Fred, always what is known as a "brat," grew into a lout. He had not enough character to be definitely vicious. He was simply "ornery." Petty, bullying, loud-mouthed and smart-aleck. He used his two years' superiority in strength and sophistication to make Fanny uncomfortable in many ingenious ways. Ma did what she could, punishing him severely. But a dress-making business requires strict application if it is to be successful. And Ma's was successful. With Fred, indeed, she was able to prevent the development of a criminal type. But she realized that he was intrinsically mean, and that, so far as "making a man of him," he would never be a job of which she could be proud.

It was Fanny herself who achieved a victory over Fred which went far toward establishing security from his depredations. This was during her ninth year. It occurred because of her precious books.

She kept under her bed a dilapidated red-cardboard doll-trunk, an early Christmas present—second hand—from Aunt Cassie, long since deceased. It was an accepted convention that certain treasures were rendered inviolable by the trunk's flimsy lock. These treasures included two old dolls, now outgrown but carefully preserved; a photograph of her father in the costume of a boatswain; and four books. Of

these, three were juvenile classics: "Ozma of Oz"; cheap editions of "The Pirate Frog" and "The Bandit Mouse." The land of Oz had always attracted her by its mythical quality, its persuasive remoteness; but of the series, this was the only one which she herself had possessed. The costumes worn by the amusing animals of the other two tales endeared them to her—and then, in the "Frog" book, there were boats.

The Kohinoor of this collection was, however, a really fine edition of "The Court of King Arthur," with illustrations by Howard Pyle. This had been one of Pa's extravagances, the source of a loud and never completely-settled wrangle with Ma. It had been, in a way, a Bible for the child and her father.

For some weeks Fred had exhibited a sudden curiosity as to the trunk's contents.

"Aw, I s'pose they's gold and silver in it. Go wan, lemme see, you big baby!" he would keep at her.

Fanny was perfectly aware that Fred had no real interest in the nature of her treasures. But they were hers, personal and sacred. Fred was certainly not to be trusted with even a look at the dolls, a type of plaything toward which he had often expressed aversion. He would undoubtedly find some novel method of injuring them. All he was after was really to bedevil her, and both recognized that fact. She disdained to pay any attention whatever to his taunts and his wheedlings. Ma's law was "hands off Fanny's trunk." She felt secure.

But she reckoned without Fred's stubbornness. The desire merely to maintain his ascendancy of a male grew into an obsession. He sulked. Then apparently he abandoned the

struggle. She did not observe the covert, malign glances with which he regarded her one afternoon as she was waiting for her mother to finish the last stitches on a dress which had to be carried over to Flatbush Avenue.

When she returned from her errand, Fred was sitting by the sewing-machine, munching on a cookie. He affected a huge air of interest in Ma's whirring of the pedal.

Fanny stopped short, with a cry, at the threshold of her room. There, upon the gallows of the gas-jet, swayed the two dolls, neatly hanged with white cord. This was merely an indignity; but they indicated further unguessable outrages.

She darted to her trunk. The lock, as she expected, was bent and awry. Pa's picture—no, that was inviolate. The books—three of them were apparently untouched. But the fourth—her knights—

The frontispiece confirmed her worst fears. Galahad, embellished with a mustache in newly-dried ink, extending three inches in length and an inch in width at its widest! The next illustration—Guinevere with a full beard and clumsily-indicated long trousers! Another picture—and another—vandalized!

With a hard sob, she walked slowly to the gas-jet, broke the string which was executing the heaviest doll. Fred saw her coming through the door, and faced her with impudent bravado.

She did not pause. She ran at Fred, swinging the large doll by the feet. With all her force, she flung its china head full into the stupid grin. The head crashed into fragments.

Ma leaped up at the noise, rushed between them. Fred's howl, blood streaming from cuts on his lips and cheek, his

quick recovery from astonished anguish and mad roar as he made for his sister.

But Ma pinioned him from behind, and held him kicking and yelling while in cold fury Fanny made her accusation, and walked unimpeded back to the bedroom, slamming the door.

Fred thereupon received the last dose of corporal punishment that his mother was ever to succeed in administering. Big as he was, justice with Ma was bigger. He dared to fight her, with kicks and scratches. She beat him with the coal-shovel, until he was almost insensible. Then, her shins bruised and her neck marked by his nails, she dragged him to efficient doctoring and cleansing.

Later, Fanny gravely thanked Ma, and even went so far as to climb upon her lap and kiss her cheek. But after a minute of being held too tightly, she indicated discomfort. Ma, with a slight sigh, went back to the whirring of the pedal.

Fred had been locked in his own room, and went without supper. He did not speak at the breakfast table, and ignored Fanny's presence. This attitude continued for a week. Gradually he returned to vocal taunts and annoyances. But physically, he had learned his lesson. He never again interfered with his sister or her personal belongings.

And the rapprochment between Ma and Fanny mellowed into more pronounced toleration on the child's part. Affectionate demonstration was still difficult. And with most of Fanny's ideas and dreams, the baggage carried from Pa's influence, Ma had little sympathy.

But Ma had established herself as honest and just. Even if she didn't understand.

3

When Fanny was twelve and Fred was fourteen, an intruder began to make his way definitely into the family circle.

This was Mr. Higham, the brother of Mrs. Finch, who occupied the flat above the Williams menage. His name was universally pronounced "Higgum." He had come from Chicago at Christmas time for a "little visit"; the visit soon took on the aspects of permanence, when he found a job in a modest hardware store in Brownsville, and sent to Chicago for his effects.

He was a quiet, unobtrusive little man, neat in his appearance, and serious of visage. Certainly no figure of high romance, he was forever being described by acquaintances as a "real nice man." He was a childless widower of long standing; his wife, obviously disliked by his sister, had been torn from a farm in Iowa to pine in loneliness and penury amid Chicago's filth and clatter. One might expect an Iowa farm-girl to be blessed with rugged strength and health, whatever else she may lack; but, as Mrs. Finch often confided to Mrs. Williams, "That Clara—it wasn't only that she didn't know a thing about keepin' a house. I had to do all the work. But she was puny, too—not even pretty. What he ever saw in her—but there, men are funny critters. We didn't get on so well—not that I didn't try, God knows. The things I put up with! She was peaked to start in with, and

she just moped and moped around. Two years I had to stand her; and one day she got pneumonia, and she just sort of give in. She passed away in a week. Lookin' back on it, I guess it was all for the best, if you know what I mean."

The ellipses in this anecdote would probably supply the details for a tragedy in the Mid-West School of Realism's best manner. But from that tale of sabotage, and recrimination and subtle torture you shall escape. Suffice it to say that Mr. Higgum never spoke of that chapter of his career, closed some twelve years before. His sister married and moved to Brooklyn shortly after, and he had lived ever since the mild bachelor existence of a hardware clerk, respectable and uneventful.

Now he was rooming with the Finches, unobtrusively pursuing his own devices, and adding steadily to his not inconsiderable savings. He was "pleasant-spoken"—when he spoke at all; and removed himself with considerable ingenuity from the path of any sisterly tempests. He was beginning to be a little bald, and Mrs. Finch revealed his age to Ma as forty-three— "Just about yourn, Mabel, hey?" with a titter.

It was not difficult to see that Mrs. Finch had certain designs, to which Mr. Higgum apparently agreed with gentle alacrity. The campaign began with games of five hundred, Ma and Higham partnered against the Finch team. Ma played with surprising skill, and received the insinuating congratulations of the Finches in phrases like "Well, you two sure do work well together." A small stake was always involved, and it became the custom for the winners, when sufficient funds were collected, to treat the losers to the movies, or to vaudeville. Ma and Higgum invariably were hosts.

At first these card contests all took place *chez* Finch.

Later, one out of every three was held in the none too palatial Williams quarters. Fanny nursed a healthy dislike for the entire Finch menage, dating from various occasions many years back when Mrs. Finch had pronounced her a spoiled, stuck-up little snip, and offered much unasked for advice to Ma regarding the raising of children to respect their elders and speak when spoken to, and not wander about wool-gathering all the time.

Mutual admiration was not increased by these faint orgies. Fanny escaped from the room most of the time, either going to the home of one or another of her companions, or retiring behind closed doors to read, and puzzle over the vacuous laughter which filtered through. When forced by circumstances to be present, she would sit quietly in a corner, her whole figure a satiric comment upon what she considered stupid conversation, unprofitable and unskillful pastiming, and incomprehensible comradery.

After almost two months of these preliminary skirmishings, Mr. Higham's siege began to take on more flagrant methods. In between the scheduled visits, he fell into the habit of dropping in every day or so after dinner, "for a little chat." This chat Fanny found as empty of entertainment and significance as the games had been. She kept wondering how her mother could tolerate so dull and commonplace a visitor.

The whole idea of anybody taking even the title of husband to her mother revolted the child to her core. After Pa —the jocose, the picturesque, the romantic! Anybody. Rage boiled within her whenever she heard the flat voice with its tortured "r's" making conversation. Whatever advances Higgum made in the way of disarming her hostility she met with stony, unmistakable calm. He was at first somewhat pathetic, then he commenced to ignore her, outside of saying "Good-

evening" and "Good-night." She, on her side, fostered her loathing of him in sulky silence.

Not wild horses could have dragged from her any spoken denunciation. To have expressed it to Ma would have been too much a capitulation, too much an abandonment of her own treasured aloofness, too much a gesture of an intimacy which habitually she avoided. She envisaged the possible permanent addition of Higgum to the household with despair and horror; what she could possibly do if the situation became acute, she could not figure out. But no power would force her to interfere—even if interference would accomplish any good, which she doubted.

It was funny about Ma's attitude, too. Certainly she betrayed no signs of kindling emotion toward Higgum. She tolerated him, she was polite, she kept up her end of the conversation. But if there were any tenderer sentiments involved, Fanny, with all her anxious study, failed to detect them.

Fred, as Fanny had anticipated, went over to the enemy. His manner was cordial and fawning. He managed to extract a series of presents, increasingly significant, in return for implied alliance. Bags of peanuts, bananas, small boxes of candy, a baseball—most of them tentatively proffered also to Fanny and met with icy but polite refusal—were accepted avidly by the prospective stepson. Fanny watched and despised, but withheld comment.

It was one of these bribes which brought about the dénouement of the Higgum episode.

For some weeks, Fred had plied his benefactor with bland hints concerning roller skates. On a certain afternoon as Fanny was passing the door to the Finch flat, Hig-

gum darted out, and with an air of dismal roguery, asked Fanny to carry two packages to her mother.

She noticed, as she deposited the heavy parcels upon the dining-table, that the round one bore the unmistakable aroma of chocolate. This was addressed to her mother, the other to Fred.

She found Ma bending over the stove.

"Mr. Higgum give me a big box of candy for you," she announced coldly.

"Candy?" said Ma, her eyes lighting up, "A big box?"

"I think it's a five-pounder," Fanny answered, in tones that were an accusation.

"A five-pounder! Honest?" Ma said, and hurried to the other room. Fanny, following her with set lips, watched the woman remove the outer wrapping. Ma stepped back from the box, and regarded it with awe.

"A five-pounder!" she repeated, "I never got a five-pounder before in my life!" She stared at it. "And Huyler's, too! Fanny, do you know what that musta cost?"

"No," Fanny replied.

"Four dollars, anyway. Maybe five. Just think of that!"

Fanny thought of that, and shared her mother's amazement. Five dollars—from that old Thing! And now Ma would think he was swell, and ask him up to supper, probably.

She turned away, scowling. She was greatly surprised at the change in Ma's voice when she unwrapped the remaining package, and exclaimed, "Roller-skates! For Fred! I bet that's all of five dollars more."

Fanny stared with surprise at the spectacle of the two packages being rewrapped in their original papers. Ma said

nothing again until she had tied the strings. Then, "Ten dollars worth of presents. Nope. That's goin' too far," she said, firmly.

Still Fanny gazed at her with uncomprehension. Ma sighed briefly, then turned toward her daughter with a searching look.

"I can't have him spendin' that much on us. Might make him think he's got some rights here."

Fanny maintained her silence, until suddenly Ma broke into a quiet chuckle.

"So you don't know everything, do you?" she said. And suddenly followed it by the remark, "Old Hickups! Why, you can see yourself in his bald head! Wouldn't need any lookin'-glass."

Bewilderment and joy overcame Fanny. She was about to rush at this hard mother of hers, and throw her arms about her in gratitude, when Fred burst into the room.

"Ma! Where's my skates? Mr. Higgum says he sent 'em up," he yelled.

Ma said, calmly, "Skates? There they are. You just take 'em right back where they come from."

"Huh?" Fred howled in incredulity.

"You heard me. And take this other thing, too. Tell him we're very sorry, and we thank him for his kindness, but we can't take things as fine as that."

"Aw, Ma!" Fred began to bellow, but Ma cut him off with a fierce sentence like a blow.

"Do what I tell you!"

Fred was intimidated. Scowling and muttering, he took the packages and went downstairs.

Ma made no further comment to Fanny. She went back into the kitchen.

Presently Fred returned, Mr. Higgum with him.

Fanny found Ma, said, "He came up with Fred." Ma twisted the corner of her mouth grimly.

To the embarrassed and timidly expostulating swain, she said, "It was real nice of you to think of us, but—here, kids. You two go out. I want to talk to Mr. Higgum a second."

In the kitchen, Fred stood furiously thrusting his face into Fanny's.

"I bet you done that. You damn little poop!"

Fanny was too full of excited delight to mind the insult. "No, No!" she said, wonderingly. "Ma did it all herself. She was makin' fun of him, too!"

"You're a liar. I'll get back at you, see if I don't. I'll get my roller-skates, too, see if I don't!"

"Oh, pooh! Your nasty old roller-skates. Who cares? It's Ma."

Fanny went into the corner, and paid no more attention to his taunts. Maybe she wasn't always fair to Ma. Who'd ever have thought this would happen?

In a very short time Ma came back into the kitchen, and, going directly to the stove, said, "Wash your hands, Fred. Fanny, set the table," quite as if nothing in the world had happened.

"But Ma—" Fred began.

"If I ever hear another word about them skates, I'll murder you," Ma interrupted. "Wash your hands and shut your mouth. Fanny, did you hear me? Set the table."

Dinner was eaten in virtual wordlessness. Ma was thoughtful; but every now and then she smiled to herself. Fanny saw the smiles, and rejoiced, guessing that they were unspoken further comments on Higgum's glistening pate and,

probably, his prominent ears. She did not venture any agreement, fearing that Ma might, perversely, change her attitude. It was enough that Higgum was the object of disdain. She need never fear him now, she was sure, as a permanent occupant of Pa's chair.

The meeting of "The Five Hundred Quartette" next evening furthered her confidence. Whatever gaiety there was seemed forced. A tension was in the air. Mrs. Finch laughed too loud. Mr. Higgum kept dropping his cards. He stole slightly piteous glances from time to time at his unrelenting inamorata.

He did not drop in for a little chat any more. The parties occurred less often, finally ceased.

One day, Mrs. Finch, up to borrow a cupful of flour, announced with an air of triumphant mystery that Mr. Higgum was getting a place of his own over in Weehawken. Ma accepted the news with apparent equanimity. Fanny was not present when he came to make his adieux.

Relations with the Finches gradually were reëstablished, without the five-hundred games, but in the form of the earlier casual visits and movie-goings.

Months later, Ma told Fanny that Mr. Higgum had just married the cashier of his hardware store who was, according to Mrs. Finch, only seventeen, and very pretty.

"Can y'imagine!" she said more to herself than to Fanny. "They'll make a lovely couple! Them ears, and that baldhead!"

She laughed harshly. Fanny joined in, and hugged her mother.

Next day, Fred found a pair of roller-skates, bought by Ma, at his place at the table. He growled because they cost

only three dollars. Besides, the fellas weren't skating any more. They were all getting bicycles.

4

The world about Fanny gathered an impression of her as a peculiar urchin, self-centered and hostile.

Such a price one usually pays for preserving any integrity of individuality. As she grew up, she developed into a young girl pretty and shapely, and apparently average. She was mediocre in her school-work, except during the time when she was exposed to the works of Sir Walter Scott; then she neglected her other duties, and spent study-hours in the back of the assembly room—she was now in first year high-school—deep in the bogus chivalry of the Waverly series. She was not aware of "putting on airs," which the less observing of her girl-acquaintances accused her of doing. She had a number of intimates, and they found her for the most part normal and companionable.

These intimates learned to respect her moods—at any rate, they put up with them. They became used to her tendency to disappear from the group at intervals, and wander off by herself, silent and engaged in her own thoughts. Sometimes one or another would endeavor to discover what she was seeking when she would lurk about the vicinity of the end of Montague Street. They followed her.

They found her almost invariably sitting upon one of the benches, looking out over the Harbor. Merely sitting and gazing. Or walking slowly about the area surrounding Hicks, Pierrepont, Joralemon and Montague. They asked questions.

She evaded them all by vague answers, and seemed to pull the corners of her being in upon herself. They were puzzled, thought she was "funny," and gradually let it go at that. It became a platitude that "oh, Well— Fanny's sort of different. But she's nice."

Early she had learned that if ideas involving Knights and prancing chargers were met within the family by non-comprehension and a total lack of sympathy, the attitude among strangers was far more brutal. Confession of even the most tentative of her chivalric notions, breathed into the ear of Jane Lunt, led to a propaganda of jeers and ridicule which lasted weeks. It was not until she left the grades that Jane and her ugly little sister left off calling her "Sleepin' Beauty" at combative intervals.

She had taken her lesson well to heart, and thereafter preserved completely unmentioned that dream-world to which she made visits whenever she was "actin' different."

There is no doubt that boys were justified in their opinion that she was "stuck-up." Boys genuinely bored her. Even by the time she was sixteen, she had discovered no youth who varied from the general pattern, represented by Fred, enough to warrant more than a passing interest. They were crude, loud-mouthed, clumsy and lacking in sensitiveness. True, there were times when she defied the negative warnings of her judgment. But the spell would last only a moment, shattered by some "dumb" remark.

She danced well, and it was under the soothing rhythm of a waltz that she came nearest to a genuine response. The swaying synchronization of movement, the warm contact of a healthy young body lulled her distastes. If her partner managed to restrain any tendency to talk, she fell into a delightful, faintly disturbed, pensiveness.

But the awakening, without exception, was irritating. The partner, misled by this unexpected pliability, and urged on by a recognition, however reluctant, of her attractiveness, would maneuver her into some situation where he could attempt a bit of love-making. He would assume himself to be the one male able to overcome her much-touted diffidence.

She would allow herself to be kissed. Always, it was an experiment on her part, most often from curiosity, sometimes hopefully. What was all this thrill in kissing that the other girls talked about? She could not find it. The boy would tremble, would fumble; or he would make some clownish remark or gesture; or his knowing fierceness would revolt her. Ever there was lacking the high beauty she sought. And the episode would abruptly end with a curt rebuke from her, or a sarcastic comment which sent the admirer away in quick anger. Three she slapped loudly and humiliatingly. Sometimes a heart-felt giggle ended the encounter. She never felt like kissing back.

The result was that she acquired a wide-spread reputation for mocking unfriendliness. Some of the boys considered her "just a damn iceberg," while others went so far as to brand her a "teaser." The general opinion was that "it's a shame such a good-lookin' kid has got such a mean disposition." She was "all right to dance with, but—"

5

Finally, late in her high-school days she experienced her one "crush."

It came about because of a refined-featured, thin boy who sat next her in Stenography. His name was Leroy Meeker. He was eighteen and she was sixteen. He was as near an approach to the æsthete as the school contained, and enjoyed reading poetry. Indeed, he wrote this commodity, pieces of which were printed every so often in the "Phalanx," the school magazine. He hoped to be a writer.

That was why he was taking short-hand, he told Fanny. He was very shy. Their first conversation occurred because he dropped a book on the floor, and she called his attention to it. He was confused and his gesture was furtive as he picked it up and hid it under his coat. After class, he explained in mumbles that it was a book of poems by somebody named Dowson. He didn't want the other boys to see it, because the "mean devils" were forever kidding him about poetry. They called him "Alice." It was the general opinion that he was a "sissy."

Fanny looked at him carefully, saw him now for the first time clearly, as she promised not to say anything to the others about the poems. He pressed her hand with a gratitude which aroused her pity.

For several days she watched him. She puzzled over the problem of his position in the community. Why did people

always want to persecute those who broke the pattern? It was true that Leroy contrasted sharply with the standard of oafish masculinity. But that was his own business, wasn't it? And there wasn't any necessity to despise him for it. His eyes were nice. His upper lip was pretty. Something like her own.

She fell into the habit of encouraging him into the exchange of small, meaningless but cordial remarks.

Her interest received considerable momentum when she discovered that he was wildly enthusiastic about football. His voice became high-pitched when he spoke of the team and its unbroken line of victories. He was bitter in his condemnation of certain inert individuals to whom the school's success was a matter of open indifference.

West High was blessed that year with a magnificent collection of "gridiron gladiators," as the papers called them. The team was well launched upon its career toward its first Greater New York championship. Excitement was strong around the corridors; "school spirit" filled the air. A campaign for organizing and pumping up enthusiasm took on violent proportions. There were fanatical outbreaks against the students who still refused to attend practice and rehearse the various cheers which "everybody" knew provided immense stimulation to athletic effort.

Fanny never questioned the efficacy of these antics. You cheered teams, as a matter of course. It was part of the "loyalty" you just naturally had. Further, she received a keen enjoyment from the sight of symmetrical young bodies performing with swift efficiency. She might have been somewhat startled if she had ever analyzed her reactions sufficiently to recognize that the sheer physical beauty of smooth, naked limbs in track suits quickened her breath, or that the

power and drive of a half-back, tearing into a line,—the crash of human against human—thrilled her regardless of the yardage gained. She made no such analysis. She simply thought the teams were "swell," and enjoyed doing her duty as a cheerer.

She herself joined in athletics as much as possible. In basket-ball, she exhibited dexterity, fleetness and considerable accuracy in "shooting." Her light weight prevented her making the girls' "varsity," but for a time she played right forward on the scrub. Stockier girls replaced her eventually. Philosophically she accepted her position as non-combatant. She always played in "pick-up" games. Sports were fun. They did you good. If you couldn't actively participate, the least you could do was to encourage; especially when your football team was the best in many years, and was obviously headed for championship, provided the "whole school was behind them."

This was the normal sentiment, shared by the school as a whole.

The recalcitrant minority numbered about ten. They stoutly resisted all coercion toward the cheerfests. They were particularly infuriating toward right-thinkers, because they were themselves excellent "team material," but refused ever to perform. While the crack of the bat or the smack of the pig-skin echoed in the breeze, these loafers infested smoke-blue pool rooms.

Most of them belonged to one gang, of which the two ringleaders were a fattish, sullen boy, weighing nearly two hundred pounds (universally deplored as marvelous guard-material gone to waste) and his stocky, slant-browed pal, highly skilled in the use of fists, known to be preparing for a professional career in the prize-ring.

These two, "Butch" Flannery and "Zippo" Rozinsky, voiced the sentiments of their intimates in scorn of West High's athletic prowess. What the hell did they want to watch a bunch of amachoors for? The Dodgers and the Yanks—that was somethin' else again. Or the bouts at the Arena. But these, now, kids—go wan, peddle yer fish! Go ahead and yell, "West High, West High, Raw, raw, raw!" But they weren't goin' to be told what to do, see? And did anybody want to make anything out of it?

Everybody did want to make something out of it. Not fistically, perhaps. But there were other ways. The gang was put in Coventry. No members of it were spoken to by loyal West High rooters. "Butch" and "Zippo" bore their banishment with guffaws and apparent nonchalance.

However, as it turned out, the treatment had some effect. On the day preceding the game against Manual Training, the persecution of the slackers reached a climax. In the morning, the football captain announced a special mass meeting for directly after the last period. There was to be a talk on "School Spirit" by the coach, a "pep" address by the president of the Senior Class, and the new song, "Fight On, West High!" was to be distributed and practiced. "Everybody come! Everybody! This means you!"

The revolters were treated to glares and whispered scorn. They curled their lips and remained silently defiant. But at lunch hour the explosion occurred.

The October number of "The Phalanx" was issued. Customarily, the "Phalanx" was considered a bore and a nuisance, grumblingly subscribed to, and quickly tossed away. But this was something special—the "Beat Manual" number, containing the picture of the squad, a fiery editorial boosting the team, vital statistics, and a prophetic cartoon showing

West High snatching a banner marked "Champ" from hideous and scrawny opponents.

It was a short poem, however, which evoked instantaneous approval, and within five minutes after the issuance was being eagerly read and repeated. This *piece de resistance* was a fervid denunciation of traitors who sat back and jeered while the School marched "on to Glory," which would later be "renowned in song and story." It ended with a clarion call:

"Let us ne'er forget our Hate
Against the Enemy within our Gate!"

What lifted this hymn to heights of daring was its positive identification of the foe. For who, reading the stanza calling down fury upon the treacheries of "Flaherties" and "Rosenheims" could fail to recognize the plain reference to Flannery and Rozinsky?

Certainly the victims of the tirade made no pretense of being deceived. Black were their countenances, raging their remarks as they made plans to discover its author, and wreak a quick vengeance.

The verse bore no signature. There were four names suggested as that of the possible scribe. General opinion focused upon the editor-in-chief, who was also manager of the football team and Student-head of the Athletic Association. Butch and Zippo revealed an unprecedented perspicacity. By instinct, it seemed, they hit at once upon the identity of their denouncer.

So it befell that Fanny was caught up into closer contact

with Leroy. For she happened along the second-floor corridor, remote from passers-by, at the moment when the two "enemies" had backed the pale poet up against the wall, and were loudly informing him that one or both would surely sock him so hard that he would taste teeth for a week.

"Cut out the stallin'," Butch was saying, "you done that dirty piece, now didn't you? One—two—three—paste him when I come to ten, Zippo!"

Fanny gasped at the sight of the waxen face, like that of a frightened little boy, trying to pull itself out of sheer fright into defiance. Why—he was nothing but a baby. And those two hulks—

Leroy caught sight of her, and courage seemed to well up in him. "Yes!" he suddenly blurted out, frantically, "yes! I wrote it, you dirty bullies!"

The two aggressors burst into a sardonic laugh at the inadequate, childish epithet. Zippo hauled back his open palm and smacked Leroy squarely. Only once. Before he could strike again, a yellowhaired whirlwind had darted in front of him.

"That's what you are! Bullies—sneaks!" Fanny found herself crying fiercely. "Two against one! And twice his size!"

Aghast, Zippo dropped his hands to his sides. Leroy choked, fighting against tears. But Butch was not to be so easily thwarted. He laid his arm across Fanny's chest, and swept her to one side.

"Beat it!" he ordered. Fanny kicked him in his right calf.

"Cheese it!" suddenly whispered Zippo, whirling away. "Here comes Agnew!"

Miss Agnew was the teacher of commercial arithmetic.

She was famous for her disciplinary measures. She was near-sighted. It was obvious that, unless someone informed her, she would not discover the situation if it were abandoned immediately.

Butch acted at once. "We'll fix you later—Alice!" he muttured, "and if you spill it—well, you better start sayin' your prayers!"

Fanny flared. Miss Agnew was now twenty yards away. "We'll keep quiet. You let him alone. Promise?"

Zippo said, "What the—" But Butch paused long enough to ejaculate, "Gees, you got a nerve. All right—sure!"

Then he dragged after him the infuriated and protesting Zippo. They proceeded down the hall into anonymity.

Miss Agnew bustled up to Fanny, who was maternally engaged in wiping with her own handkerchief the nose which was beginning to bleed pitifully, like that of a child who has tripped over the curb. The image flashed into the mind of Fanny, and she explained without further thought, "He fell up the stairs. He's all right. Just hurt his nose a little."

Miss Agnew was dimly suspicious. "Those two boys—" she began.

"They went to get some water," Fanny interrupted. Then, turning to Leroy, "Come on, they'll bring it." She pulled at his arm.

Miss Agnew let them proceed away from her. She was really relieved that circumstances hadn't been what she had suspected.

Safe around the corner, Fanny again examined the nose.

Leroy was breathing hard, determined to keep from weeping. Fanny, to her surprise, found that she was not revolted by the spectacle of an eighteen-year-old on the verge of tears. She was actually annoyed to discover that her feel-

ings were overwhelmingly compassionate. She could see that he wanted to thank her, but did not dare trust his voice.

"You're all right now," she said, "I guess they won't hurt you." What a big baby he was! "That was a good poem," she added, more to restore his equanimity than because she really thought so.

She turned and walked quickly away. He had appeared, after her remark, to be about at the breaking-point.

He must have gone straight home after his injury, for he did not appear at the mass-meeting, nor at cheering-practice. Continually she pondered about him during the afternoon. He was everywhere called a sissy, he was totally incompetent at athletics, yet of all the supporters of teams, he was the most constant. Why? What brought his fragile figure out into the grandstand, day after day, lifting a shrill voice in support of football, baseball, track—activities with which he could not ever hope to cope? Why was he so hysterical in his attack upon disloyalty? Weak and effeminate, still there was a certain bravery about him. He was not wholly to be despised just because he could not hit back. She pitied him; she was astounded that she was worried over him.

He appeared next day, his nose swollen and his left eye somewhat empurpled. All during the stenography class she kept discovering him looking at her, shyly and dependently. Finally he pushed a note over to her.

"Will you sit next to me at the game?" it said.

She was about to shake her head in scornful negation. Then that maternal impulse took hold of her once more, and almost against her will she nodded, "Yes."

They walked from the main building to the football field in silence. She noticed a number of startled glances, and

sundry sniggers which commented upon her choice of escort. She pretended utter indifference. As they entered the small grandstand, she was excited to see a face, grinning sarcastically from three rows below. It was that of Butch, attending his first West High game in three years. She heard him squall, in a falsetto, "Ow, Mah-mah!" But there was nothing threatening in his demeanor. She understood. A bargain was a bargain. Leroy need fear no further demonstration from him.

Her protégé caught the full significance of the episode. As the whistle blew for the kickoff, he found articulateness. Gingerly and timidly he pressed her arm with the tips of his fingers. "Thanks," he said. Then his shrill voice joined, happily, the "long yell."

He gained confidence as the game proceeded, and West High piled up point after point. He commented upon various plays, showing a keen knowledge of the game's technique. His expressions were not altogether fitting, in Fanny's opinion. She did not entirely relish hearing a cross-buck described as "just too wonderful," or a trick play as "a perfect peach." Yet he called her attention, in such phrases, to details she would otherwise have missed completely. She decided he was "bright."

She could not restrain herself from bursting into laughter, however, at the adjective he used to describe the forward passing of Len Marshall, the star who was already a foregone conclusion as All-High half-back.

"Isn't it lovely, the way he throws them?" Leroy gasped.

Lovely!

That word—for accuracy that was a miracle, for the perfect timing of the cast, for the effortless grace that flashed a breath-taking image! Len Marshall, plunging like a sword

through the massed line, eluding with an incalculable swerve the savage grope of an end, or cutting down Manual's vaunted backs time after time for losses. "Lovely!"

She put Leroy out of her mind for the rest of the game, answering his piping comments in monosyllables. A strange new emotion was overcoming her. Always before she had watched Len with admiration, with a detached recognition of his abilities. Now, it was as if her revolt against the adjective used by Leroy had fastened all her attention, all her consciousness upon this athletic masterpiece, who was piling up the points against his school's most dangerous rival.

Once, toward the end of the game, she choked with terror when time was taken out, and she saw that the figure lying motionless upon the ground was Marshall. Once before she had seen him temporarily disabled, and had, of course, been perturbed. But more because of the damage to the team which his disability would bring about. Now, she fought against a rising alarm which caught at her breath. Sickly she clutched Leroy's hand, and whispered, "Oh—he'll be all right, won't he?" It was as if something precious, inexpressibly dear, belonging to herself, were damaged.

She shuddered with relief as he stood up, trotted back to his position, and, taking the ball, sifted through the entire Manual team for thirty yards and a touchdown.

Suddenly she discovered the word for him. It sang in her ears, over and over. "Noble." Len Marshall was "Noble." Always she had looked for someone to whom the word would apply. Now she had found him.

Soon the game was over. The crucial game won, thirty-six to ten. And Len, the tireless, the brave, the dashing—the responsible. Noble!

She beamed upon Leroy, who, vociferous in his approba-

tion of Len's prowess, was suggesting, "Let's crowd down there. Let's tell him he was so marvelous!"

She put her hand through his arm gayly, and they squeezed through the milling mob. At the entrance to the gym they caught up with him. The light above the gym-door shone like an aureole around his towsled head. (Noble!)

Leroy rushed to him, squeaking excitedly, "Attaboy, Len! Attaboy!"

Fanny, hanging back, gulped. To shout as a member of a group—that was one thing. But to offer congratulations personally, to face this mud-incrusted young god and say the right phrase—never before had she done a thing like that. Never had she wished to. Formerly, she would have considered it silly—just a little too much.

Nevertheless, she mustered her courage, and walking straight to him, said, "Gee, Len—you were wonderful."

Something in the intensity of her voice obviously startled him. He turned toward her, and peered into her face. But she detected no awakening of interest. He had evidently mistaken her for someone else. He was acutely impersonal as he grinned mechanically, and answered, "Oh—thanks."

Just then another girl, in the shadows, said, "Hey, Len!" and, his face lighting up, he whirled to her. They began an animated conversation in a low voice.

Fanny jerked Leroy by the hand. "Come on," she said.

Leroy gabbled praise of Len as they walked home. Fanny said nothing. She had been put in her place, humiliated, set back into the anonymous crowd of silly hero-worshipers. She was furious with herself, with the boor who had so casually ignored her.

"Oh, for goodness sakes!" she burst out, finally. "Talk about something else!"

Leroy was startled into silence. But soon he recovered his aplomb sufficiently to talk about himself, at first tentatively, then more confidently as she exhibited appreciation. She listened little, but managed to convey the impression that she was all attention. Flattered, he chattered on. As they reached her house, she became aware that he was telling her how swell it was to find a girl that understood the sort of stuff he liked.

At the steps, he stood shyly looking at her.

"Will you—will you be my friend?" he asked, haltingly.

"What a silly question!" She laughed, as she answered, "Why, sure!"

She could find no justification for the intensity of gratitude with which he received this remark. He was a nice kid. Sure, she'd be friends.

He was completely out of her thoughts as she flung herself face-downward upon her bed in the black room. Until she was called to supper she lay and gnawed her handkerchief.

Fury and a new ache fought within her. What had happened to her, that her anger at Len's imperviousness could not drive him from her consciousness? The stuck-up, spoiled thing!

Yet all the time she knew he was not stuck-up, not spoiled. He was swift, he was beautiful, he was a hero. And who was she, to deserve more than a passing glance?

She rose, turned on the lights, and blinked at herself in the mirror. Well—her hair was pretty. You couldn't get around that. And plenty of boys—yes, plenty and plenty of them—

Oh, well—forget him.

Thereafter, she tried to shut his lithe splendor from her mind.

She neglected cheering practice, finding duties at home, helping her mother.

Or she went walking with Leroy, who pursued her shyly for attention.

6

Twice she walked with him through the bright October air, and half-heard his excited talking, which she but a quarter understood. She came to sympathize vaguely with his enthusiasms, his intense concentration upon his hobbies. They were not hobbies which had ever interested her before.

She thought that his long harangue about the Greeks and the statues in the assembly room was remarkable, even if it was somehow not exactly "nice." It might be all right to feel excited about splendidly curving bodies—she realized that she felt so herself. But you didn't talk about it. Something got spoiled in talking. Especially it wasn't proper for a boy to get flushed and big-eyed when he said things about the Discus-thrower, and honestly, there was a gleam in his eye while he was raving about the perfect forms of the "Wrestlers"—a gleam which resembled that of other boys when they were whispering dirty stories.

She was touched, however, by the immensity of his anxiety to please her. She knew he was putting forth all his

efforts to be interesting and amusing. Therefore, too, she was flattered. Likewise, she was a little awed by his glibness, by some of the words he used, and by her suspicion that after all, she herself might be intellectually lacking in many ways. She allowed herself to feel that perhaps he knew things she didn't, and that she might learn something valuable. This was against her instinct, which kept warning her that Leroy was talking considerable nonsense, and that this nonsense was just what contributed to him so much of what went by the name of "sissiness."

Perhaps she would not have gone with him a second time, if, at the end of that first walk, he had not suddenly turned away and said, in a muffled voice, "You don't know how fine it is—for me to talk to you. I never found anybody else that —that liked these things. I suppose there are other people. Only—I get so lonely."

It was certainly unmanly of him to make such a confession. Yet already she was reconciled to his unmanliness. He was childish, but pitiful. Therefore, she consented, several days later, to go down with him to the docks, to see two Central American ships unloading fruit.

He was eloquent about the "lovely" lines of the hull—once more that word. Here, however, it seemed more appropriate. He remarked that the oranges were like the sun which was then setting. He discoursed upon how it was too bad that ships didn't have "wings" any more, but were simply "furnaces that floated."

Thus he pleased her, and she drew him out, since every compliment to sailing-ships was a glorification of her father's trade. And she was not over-disturbed at what happened when two sailors lurched by.

Leroy was aghast. He caught their leer, he saw one

whisper to the other, and his lips were white with compression when the taller, brushing him in passing, said loudly, "Hello, sister. Got a date to-night?" whereupon both went on their way, guffawing.

"The—the skunks!" he burst out to her.

"Oh—they don't mean any harm," she protested, in some surprise at his anger, "I don't mind if they speak to me, so long as they go on and mind their own business."

She attributed the relief he showed to the fact that she did not demand protection.

"To you!" he stuttered. Then quickly, "Oh, sure. Well, just the same—the dirty skunks!"

Rapidly he denounced these steam-ship sailors, saying that they didn't deserve the name "sailors" since sailing ships went out of use. "Janitors, that's all they are!"

In such manner he covered up his distress, and even gained in her esteem, for he praised the days of the wind-jammers, and their men. She responded by telling him a little about her father, how he was one of the last of the old-timers, and a wonderful sailor.

She knew, too, that he meant to be pleasing when he said that the Greeks had been great seamen, and he thought that sails developed beautiful bodies.

He nearly spoiled the entire afternoon when he remarked that Len Marshall would have made a fine sailor, that he had such a wonderful body. The phrase whipped her, like a lash across the face.

She felt, then, that she could not bear sitting with Leroy at the Poly game next day. His slight lisp, that adjective "lovely"—no, that would be too much.

She sat instead with Pearl Meredith, unobtrusively and silently watching Len once more rip his opponents to pieces.

Fifty-four to nothing this time, and Len himself made six of the touchdowns, besides a drop-kick from a difficult angle.

Silently she watched, and gritted her teeth. It was good for old West High. But Len—

"Isn't he the greatest player that ever went to any High School!" demanded Pearl.

"Oh—I don't know," Fanny replied, "Remember, there's ten others to help him."

But—liar! She knew well that it was all Len—that without the verve, the flash of his ability and personality, West High would be droning along, mediocre, as usual. She hated herself for knowing it. She hated him. From afar she saw him swing across the field, surrounded by admirers. He was cool, confident, calculatingly modest. That same girl was hanging upon his words. Martha Wangar—she recognized her now. Just a pretty, dumb doll. All right. Exactly what you would expect from a football player. A pair of handsome boneheads.

Leroy wasn't any bonehead. Far from it. He was brilliant. He could write, he could appreciate, something went on in his head besides calculations of punts, or line-bucking strategy. She smiled warmly on Leroy, who was asking her if he could accompany her home.

He was in an exalted mood, the game had excited him in a literary way. If he could only write a poem which could do justice to the poetry of football! The men sweeping down the field, like these leaves being swept by the wind. Did she think writing poetry was—silly? Did she despise him because he loved poetry?

She replied that she didn't know much about it. They made you read it in school, and that ruined it. "The sun, that

brief December day rose cheerless over hills of gray, and tumpty-tumpty-tumpty-tay—" all that stuff.

He agreed, excitedly. A person ought not to have poetry pounded into him. He ought to be allowed to find for himself. And good poetry, not these sermons. Listen, here was one. He recited something about "Cynara," which he said was written by somebody named Dowson.

It disturbed her. That refrain about "sick of an old passion." Just a little nasty. And yet, the lilt of it fascinated her.

He sensed her slight repugnance, and switched over to the Rubaiyat. This, too, she found vaguely distasteful, though the rhythm was pleasing. All this raving about drinking, though—

"Don't you like it?" he broke off, and queried disappointedly.

She swished her feet through the crisp, scarlet maple leaves. They crunched delightfully, making a hushed music. Her eye tingled with the richness of their color, deepening every moment as the twilight ripened to mauve. The thought shot through her: this was true poetry—something you couldn't catch in sentences, something too large for words.

"I don't know—" she began, following the graceful zigzag descent of a leaf from an elm-top. "I—I guess you have to get used to it."

They were passing a bonfire, smoldering in the gutter. She threw back her head and sniffed the pungency deep.

"Oh—smell that!" she cried.

He answered immediately that he simply loved the smell. In fact, it was funny, wasn't it, but he was just then writing a poem about burning leaves. He was trying to tell how the

smell made him homesick—homesick for places he hadn't ever seen, far away.

She was charmed. Why, she had often felt the same way—she felt that way now! He was a regular mind-reader!

Made confident by his apparent understanding, she enlarged upon her sensations.

"It makes me pretend I'm in an old forest—you know, I mean hundreds of years ago. Sherwood Forest, see? Or—or maybe where King Arthur lived. Or like in Sir Walter Scott, —'Ivanhoe.' You know what I mean."

He remained embarrassed and silent.

"I mean—" she pursued, "now it's all dark and mysterious, and look up the street, it's really a road, and Rowena's waiting in the castle, and the knights are going to come riding up."

"Yeh—" he said, doubtfully, "well—I never did like that Scott stuff much. It sounds silly to me."

"What!" She felt annoyance rising quickly.

"Those knights—oh, well, I don't believe they were noble. I think they were rough-necks—robbers, that's all."

She was stupefied. She froze into bitter speechlessness. She dug her heels into the sidewalk, kicked viciously at the leaves. Of all the fools! Should she just walk off and leave him?

"—And the terrible way he writes about them!" Leroy was continuing, "Why—his writing just makes me sick. I don't know why they ever thought he could write—"

He did not finish the sentence, because from behind a big tree there stepped none other than Zippo Rozinsky. With a fine economy of movement, Zippo seized the back of Leroy's neck in one hand, while with the other he squeezed his left "funny-bone."

Leroy let out a shrill shriek of pain and fright.

"Yeh?" his assailant chuckled mirthlessly, "Thought you got away with it, did you? So I'm a traitor, am I, you bastard!" He kicked Leroy vigorously with his knee.

Fanny's anger was immediately turned against Zippo. She hurled herself on him, yanking at his elbows.

"What do you mean!" she cried, "Butch said—"

"Yeh, 'Butch said,' did he?" Zippo mocked her, methodically strengthening his hold on his now screaming victim, "Well—Butch ain't me, see? Get away, now. I don't want to hurt *you.*"

"You leave him alone!" Fanny cried again, and raked his face with her finger-nails. The blood stood out on his cheeks.

He was amazed, and to her consternation he was pleased. He thrust Leroy directly in front of him, and with all his force kicked him in the back.

Leroy flew through the air, fell limp, shrieking, "Oh, my spine! Oh, my spine!"

"Well, I'll be God-damned!" Zippo said, admiringly facing Fanny. His right arm shot out and wrapped itself about her shoulders. "Some little wild-cat, ain't you!"

He pulled her toward him, remorselessly. Then his ugly mouth kissed her full on the lips.

She wrenched her head sidewards, spat furiously, beat her fists against his face.

He laughed, and pulled her towards him again.

"That's for the scratches, see? And this is because you're a damn pretty kid."

Fanny fought. She could hear Leroy groaning, "My spine! Oh, my spine!"

Conquering her loathing and disgust, she dug her teeth

into Zippo's shoulder, biting frantically. The filthy clothing was too thick. She could make little impression through it.

Zippo chuckled, and twisted his chin upwards.

Fanny saw a bicycle dropped at the curb, and someone reaching her side in several quick leaps. She felt Zippo wrenched violently, and herself released.

Zippo, astonished, faced the intruder. Cursing violently, he demanded what, who and why.

The rescuer was Len Marshall, on his way home. Zippo backed away, putting himself into a fighting crouch, as Len stood protecting Fanny.

"All right, you big stiff!" said Zippo venomously, in a low voice, "I been wantin' to get a crack at you." He stepped forward, compact, deadly-appearing, efficient. Fanny was well aware of his fighting abilities. Only last week she had heard of his work in a preliminary bout at some sporting-club, how he had knocked out, in the second round, a bruiser forty pounds heavier. And Len was about his weight, though a trifle smaller. What chance would he have against a trained boxer?

She gasped. But she need not have feared. Len had no idea of playing Zippo's game. He merely poised upon his toes, and hurled himself through the air in his inimitable flying-tackle.

He hit the indignant pugilist irresistibly, his arms folded about the knees, his head buried in his opponent's solar plexus. Down they crashed, and Zippo lay motionless, unconscious.

Len arose immediately, brushed off his clothes, and smiled. "He'll be all right in a second," he said. He turned at once to Leroy, who was now standing, gingerly rubbing his spine. "What about you?"

Leroy groaned, and hobbled several steps. His mortification was overwhelming him, but he managed to blurt out, "I—I'm all right, I guess."

Zippo sat up, slowly. He fought for his breath, coughed out a few words.

"Holy—Jumpn'!" he clutched his side, and winced with pain. "My ribs is busted."

"I hope so," answered Len.

Still wincing, Zippo pulled himself upright, and stood swaying, while painfully he delivered himself of ten phrases obscenely descriptive of Len. "You wait!" he concluded. "I'll get you! I'll get you if it takes a year! Jesus, what I won't do to you!"

"Yeh?" Len mocked him.

Zippo did not vouchsafe even a glance at Leroy, as he turned away, and hobbled up the street, rubbing his ribs tenderly.

All the while, Fanny had been unable to find words. Now, she was tongue-tied with gratitude, with self-consciousness.

Timidly she said, "Oh—Len—thank you! Thank you!"

She raged within herself at her stupidity. Why couldn't she pour out to him her adoration?

Len himself made demonstration impossible. Brushing his clothes again, not in the least embarrassed, he said with ineffable smugness, "Oh, that's all right. It was just a trick. Anybody could do it."

Humbly, Fanny said, "Oh. . . . Well—thanks anyway."

"All right," replied Len, going to the curb. Then, with even more self-satisfaction, he added, "I guess he won't bother you any more."

Leroy struggled with himself, and managed to say, "Thanks."

Len looked at him with good-natured contempt. "Sure," he said, mounting his bicycle. "You better rub some Omega Oil on your back. That's what we use."

Without even nodding to Fanny, he rode swiftly away into the darkness.

Fanny stared after him, in a bewildered daze. Cavalierly she had certainly been treated, her personality ignored; she was just anybody—any girl in a predicament, to be rescued by a consciously superior being. Why, if she were as ugly as Rita Landis, Len would have done the same thing! Yes, rescued she undeniably had been. She rubbed her mouth viciously, where it stung from Zippo's horrible kiss.

Leroy's first remark to her infuriated her again. He was standing humiliated, chagrined, all his self-pride beaten down. But jealousy was foremost in his voice as he said, in tremulous fury, "My goodness! If he don't hate himself!"

Fanny whirled upon him. "That's a fine way to talk! After what he did!" She turned her back on him. "I'm going."

Leroy limped over to her quickly, pulled at her sleeve imploringly. "Don't be sore! Please don't be sore!"

"Sore!" she flung at him, completely conscious of her unreasonableness, "Honestly!"

Leroy persisted, and went headlong to his doom. "He thinks he's so wonderful! I suppose you call that fighting fair."

Fanny drew herself up and faced him, shaking his hand from her arm.

"You're a—you're a *worm!*" she pronounced clearly, "You make me sick!"

She paused, and delivered her final insult.

"Alice!" she said.

She strode away from him at full speed. He did not fol-

low. At the corner she stole a glance back. He was standing where she had left him. He looked crumpled. He was crying, she guessed.

She felt a shock of pity and compunction.

But she did not return. She was aware of her cruelty, and it troubled her. But she was well rid of him. She knew, now, that she had only tolerated him because of his helplessness. But he was a sissy. His lah-de-dah talk was nonsense. Look at what he thought about knights! He was a fool. She hoped he'd keep out of her way, from now on.

(Knights!)

7

For a week Len was never out of her mind. During the study periods when he was in the room, she sat gazing at the dark-brown of his head, longing to stroke it. How she wished that he was not a senior, so that she could attend the same classes—perhaps even sit by him!

She thrilled whenever he would pass her, swinging with grace, with—she was fully aware—conscious unconsciousness of his lordly position among these mortals, deliberately democratic, pretending that he felt he was "just one of the fellows."

Several times he smiled to her in recognition. The smile was, no doubt, condescending. But still—it was a smile.

She eyed with loathing the familiarity exhibited toward

him by Martha Wangar. "His girl," acknowledged as such, smirking and possessive. Huh. Only last Spring, Mollie Carroll had been Len's "girl." These days, Mollie went with a different crowd, negligible and neglected. So it would be with Martha, sooner or later. And—if Fanny—

She mused, she planned. Her dancing—that was it. The Thanksgiving Hop, held in the Gym by the Seniors. Charlie Mosher would take her. He had asked her, early in September. She had given an evasive and, her memory pricked her, a rather rude answer. But that was easily remedied. A little flattery, and Charlie would be back, pleased and grinning, the silly ape.

She would make Charlie book a dance with Len. Two dances, perhaps. Then—she must plan her campaign. Catch Len's attention, somehow. If it were only fancy dress. But perhaps in the way she would dance with him. His arms about her! She would let him crush her close. In that way, she would make him understand. . . .

So Len was in her thoughts, her hero, her knight. All the time, the colder, harder part of her brain analyzed him, told her that he was only a splendid athlete, stupid, swaggering, self-centered. She fought these counsels down, conquered them. It was such a lovely feeling to thrill over somebody, to be idiotic about him.

She built, deliberately, a legend about him, within herself. In a short time, she was convinced that he fitted into the legend. She could not tell fact from reality. She had the romantic circumstances for the skeleton. Hero-rescuer-knight.

Outwardly, she became more aloof, more "peculiar" than ever. When Leroy made timorous attempts at approach, she did not even take the trouble of expressing, in so many words, her dislike. She looked through him.

Once, he went so far as to waylay her outside the practice-field, to stammer a number of sentences about how sorry he was for being a coward—wouldn't she forgive him—

In the midst of a phrase she turned and looked at him with wide eyes, and said, disconcertingly, "What? What did you say?"

He gulped, turned very red, and walked rapidly away. She did not notice his going. She was intent upon Len, in his crimson "W" sweater, who had sent a punt spiraling fifty yards.

At home, Fred kept up a continual fire of sarcasm about her preoccupation.

Fred scorned all matters connected with the school. Two years before, being questioned along with several others about playing hookey and attending the races at Jamaica, he had refused to lie, and alone had served as scapegoat. Not that there was any high-mindedness concerned with his sacrifice. It was simply that he was weary of an education which rolled ineffectively from his head, and seemed to him an enormous waste of time, enforced by his mother. He was happy to be fired, and told Ma so. She accepted the inevitable. He was allowed to seek a job. After nearly a year of abortive efforts, he settled down in a vague employment, "all-around dog," he called it, in the Gotham Chain Shirt Store on Flatbush Avenue. Here, at any rate, he remained, and it seemed reasonable that some knowledge of the business would seep into his head by sheer attrition.

He had encountered Fanny upon the steps at the end of her second walk with Leroy. At once, he had indulged in ridicule of "Fanny's Pet." Now, perceiving what he called her "actin' like a sick calf," he attributed it to love, and harped continually upon her affair with "little Nemo," hav-

ing culled that appellation from the Sunday comic-sheet.

"Don't disturb her, Ma," he would caution, with extravagant winks. "She's dreamin' about little Nemo. Oozums ittle tootsy-ootsy?"

She handled him with an effectiveness perfected by long practice. She never answered him. She ignored him. He was not there. He would fly up, rage to Ma about "Ain't she swell company? Ain't she? Ain't she?" Tranquilly she would sit undisturbed, while Ma sighed, and said "Oh, for God's sake, Fred. Mind your own business. Can't we have a little peace in the house?"

At the end of the week, West High played Horace Mann, invaders from across the river, undefeated and touted as the finest team in Manhattan.

Fanny's seat was far beyond midfield, but it was in the second row, a favorable position for the close inspection of her idol.

Horace Mann proved all that their reputation had proclaimed. The first half was scoreless. Len simply could not get free. It was clear that the whole Manhattan team had orders to "play Marshall," and play him they did. Every time he took the ball, he was smothered. When he was called upon to pass, the opposing forwards crashed through and sent the pass wild. Len played a magnificent defensive game, twice nailing runners who had only him between them and certain scores. He put forth every effort, but to no avail. And the team, shaken in its morale by the failure of their leader, lacked its accustomed punch.

Fanny, agonized as she was by the relentless and successful thwarting of her knight, could not but admire the work of the two who led the persecution. The left tackle and the left end were on Len at every play, and they seemed infal-

lible, as well as merciless. With only ten minutes of the second half remaining, both hit Len as he started a punt on his own forty-yard line. The ball glanced from his toe sidewise into the open arms of the Horace Mann quarterback, who raced over the goal-line unopposed.

Despair settled down upon the West High stand. It was small comfort that the goal from touchdown went wide. The game looked irretrievable.

But now, a change had come over Len. He became demoniac. He received the ball on the kick-off, and, abandoning his interference, charged down the sideline, along the West High stand. The faithful end and tackle went to meet him, directly in front of Fanny. They closed as one.

Len made no attempt to sidestep. The three went down in a heap. Only two arose. The end lay writhing, his right jaw dislocated by what one of the newspapers described next day as "a vicious example of Marshall's bulls-eye straight-arm."

There were loud outcries of "slug!" from the furious tackle. The referee ruled that no foul had been committed. Play was resumed, the plucky end refusing to quit the game. But the starch had been taken out of him.

No foul? But Fanny, icy from the shock of certain knowledge, had seen. Len had used no straightarm. His fist had been closed. It was a slug—deliberate, brutal.

She tried to persuade herself that she had been mistaken. Perhaps she hadn't seen right. Her mind rocked with panic. Of what avail to lie? Her knight—

A sudden wild shout all about her jerked her eyes to the field.

Len again—right there, at the sideline. She could not bear to look at his face. She saw his shoes, planted several inches

inside the marking. She heard the thud of the ball, as it settled in his arm. A long forward pass, perfectly executed. Grimly, she raised her eyes, and saw him tear across the goal. The score was tied!

But was it? A revolving mass of players surrounded the referee, shouting. Gradually, it became apparent to the spectators that the Horace Mann team were making a protest. Loudly they claimed that Len's foot had been beyond the side-line when he caught the pass. The ball, they bellowed, went over to them. The score did not count.

Fanny considered the whole controversy ridiculous. Had she not seen clearly that Len's foot was in valid territory?

The referee lost his head. He did something unspeakable from an official basis. Waving his hands wildly above his head, he pulled Len to one side. He confessed that he was not sure of the ruling. He put it up to Len; had his foot been outside, or in?

Len's face was to Fanny a book in huge print, as he stood hesitating. She saw him weighing the alternatives. If he said his foot was inside—the score counted, and there was every chance that the extra point would immediately sail over the bar, and the game would be theirs. On the other hand, if he said his foot was outside, the game, barring miracles, was lost, and with it all hope of championship. Yet —the glory that would come to him, for honesty! The applause for "playing square," even at the cost of triumph! (Honesty—a lie. "Playing square"—a lie.)

Shaking his head sadly, but with the manifest air of a martyr to sportsmanship, Len spoke. "I guess it was outside, all right."

Something cracked deep within Fanny. The rest of her

dream-castles came tumbling down. She knew him, now, for the grandstand player, the hypocrite, the liar that he was.

His judgment was completely sound. To this day the legend is told around West High, of Len Marshall, the great half-back who put the honor of his school far, far above victory. The story was flashed by the Associated Press to the farthest corners of our land. The Brooklyn Eagle printed a column editorial of praise and pride. The editorial was headed, "Nobility."

Virtue, to round out the incident prettily, was rewarded. The miracle happened. On the third play following Len's glorious deed, the Horace Mann fullback fumbled, West High's quarterback scooped up the ball, and planted it, some seconds later, squarely between the goal-posts. Len, taking plenty of time, added the extra point. And a moment later, to rub it in, he received the kick-off and scrambled through the entire invading team, to put the game completely "on ice."

Fanny, swaying with nausea, made her way along the barricade. As she reached the opening, she was almost crushed by the crowd, who, in pandemonium, were carrying Len upon their shoulders. Laughing and protesting, he managed to gain his feet, and was pushed squarely against Fanny.

Her eyes blazing, she looked him squarely in the face. In a low voice, she said distinctly, "I saw you! Both times! I saw your foot—you liar!"

He started to answer, then turned his eyes away. The crowd hoisted him up again, carrying him to the gym, where for ten minutes they cheered him. The small group of Horace Mann rooters came there, also. They, too, gave a loud cheer for "a regular sport."

8

Thus, her first great disillusionment, and her disgust, completed her indifference to males.

Thereafter, she could not look at Len, she could not hear his name, without experiencing a little pain and a sensation of illness. She said nothing about the incident to anyone. What was the use? It mattered, really, only to herself. Always afterwards she entertained a strong dislike of athletic idols. It meant nothing to her that Len became, later, a famous all-American back. Even when he quit college, joined the Lafayette escadrille, and was reported as dying gloriously, endeavoring to save two companions, her first reaction was, "He would." And then, she mused, "Wonder what the real truth about that was."

Leroy made no more efforts to reinstate himself. He took up with several peculiar-appearing youths, who were even more in the bad graces of the school than himself. He performed one piece of spite work which apparently salved his wounded ego. He spread about the school the information that Fanny was "crazy about Marshall—just perfectly crazy! And he won't have a *thing* to do with her!"

This served to kill the last lingering compunctions which Fanny might have had regarding her treatment of him, and her opinion. She remained prejudiced, once and for all,

against anyone who made pretensions toward culture. Elegance and "sissiness" were inextricably conjoined in her mind. Between a Leroy and a Zippo, she would infinitely have preferred the roughneck. But, as she said to herself, she didn't have to be bothered with either. No, nor any other boys. They made her sick.

Her interest in the football games was gone. She attended no more. School, in all its phenomena, bored her.

Therefore, around Christmas time, she received an instantaneous inspiration when she overheard a loud colloquy between Fred and Ma. Fred had just received a raise of two dollars per week. Ma was suggesting that he contribute a dollar of it as a little extra toward the rent. Her eyes, she said, were not as strong as they used to be. She couldn't do quite as much sewing.

Fred, characteristically, protested vehemently. It wasn't the money so much, he averred. Sure, he'd give it. But why the hell did he have to support Fanny? Why couldn't she do her part? Here she just laid around all the time—carrying the clothes to customers wasn't anything. He had to shell out—and a lot of thanks he got. Nothin' but sass, and stuck-up ways.

Fanny, who had returned through the kitchen-door, waited no longer. She walked directly into the sitting-room, and addressed herself to Ma.

Fred, for once, was right, she said. She wanted to help out. It was time she was earning something.

"But—school," Ma replied, weighing the situation, "I don't never want it said I didn't give you your education."

"I've got enough education," Fanny remonstrated, "Books, and all those things! What good will it do, anymore? Look.

I can learn to be a good stenographer in three months. You can lend me the money to go to Business College. Or you can," she added, turning to Fred.

"Fat chance," he growled, "Where'll I get it from? Pick it off a bush, hey?"

Ma pursed her lips. "I can get hold of it," she remarked, "if I think it's right. I'll see."

"I'll pay you back out of what I get paid when I get a job," Fanny continued, "And then I can give more than Fred, afterwards. Fair is fair. And I'm awfully tired of school."

Ma pondered the matter deeply. The next morning she announced that, seein' as Fanny felt the way she did, it was her own affair.

Fanny made the twentieth of January, her seventeenth birthday, the occasion of her withdrawal from West High. She bade good-by to a few of her girl-acquaintances. She experienced not the slightest sadness; principally, she was relieved at escaping the mid-year examinations, just beginning.

She enrolled next day at the Climax Business College.

9

She applied herself vigorously to mastering short-hand and typewriting. The lessons she had taken at West High were, she found, an asset. Her progress was rapid.

In these new surroundings, she maintained, she even increased, her reputation as "a grouch." She entered into none of the larking, the flirtations, the juvenile intrigues which went on. The boys, after sundry fruitless attempts at arousing her interest, gave her up. She acquired one friend, a plump, red-haired girl named Katherine Taylor.

Katie was hard-boiled, witheringly sarcastic, and openly contemptuous of her fellow-students, whom she unhesitatingly characterized as "saps." She approved highly of Fanny's aloofness. The two formed the habit of eating lunch together. From Katie, Fanny learned considerable wisdom in the ways of the world. She discovered that, while Katie was harsh and skeptical toward practically everyone, once she gave her friendship, it was given for keeps.

Katie finished her course three weeks before Fanny, and found a job at once. Fanny was lonely without her. She concentrated even closer upon her work. The result was that she finished second in the Spring contest for speed in transcribing from notes.

She waited nearly a month after "graduation" for a position. Meanwhile, she answered advertisements, but for one reason or another, chiefly her inexperience, she was not taken.

Eventually, the College ("a job for every graduate") put her in touch with a real estate office, where, reluctantly, she accepted much smaller wages than she had expected. There she remained less than a month, since business was slack, and, there being little for her to do, the boss decided to cut down even that small expense. Within the next year, she worked for a wholesale fur house, and a law firm, did piece-work copying manuscripts for an old man who wrote stories for the cheaper magazines, and was initiated into

the mysteries of the adding machine, in a little shoe-store.

In none of these places was she annoyed by personal relations. She smiled when she remembered Katie's warnings. These business-like people seemed far too worried, too harassed, too busy to look upon her as anything but a piece of machinery. True, one or two clerks "made passes" at her, but they were furtive and easily discouraged. The only one of her employers who went into the realm of personalities was the writer. He waxed bitter constantly over her inability to read his slovenly hand-writing, and ridiculed her for not correcting his spelling. She stood his peculiarities only six weeks. When she told him she had a regular job, he denounced her so savagely that she hesitated to ask for the twenty dollars he still owed her. When she came back, a week later, to collect, she found he had moved away, leaving no address.

She was unhappy in the shoe-store, resenting the fact that she was doing the work of an assistant book-keeper, while receiving only her salary as stenographer—and a low salary, at that. She was pumping up her courage for a showdown with the thin, hawk-faced Jew who employed her, when one evening she received a telephone call from Katie.

J. G. Magnus & Co., Katie's firm, was moving into larger offices on Fulton Street. They needed three new girls, they treated you grand, did Fanny want to come over?

Fanny did.

She settled down, then, as one of seven stenographers in this huge commission house, handling canned goods, dried fruit, sardines, salmon, apple by-products and sugar. Katie aided her in mastering the technicalities. The work was in-

teresting; there was no fixed routine; it varied from making out invoices to salesmen's correspondence, and even personal letters dictated (but not read) by the officers.

The president, old J. G. Magnus himself, was a kindly, long-winded and often blustering old gentleman, who wore collars much too big for him. At first, Fanny often wondered how such an old fluff could have attained his powerful position. Later, when she was more capable of making judgments, she was impressed often by the unexpected shrewdness, the far-sightedness, and the quickness of his decisions.

Life, then, settled into a cheerful monotony. She gave a third of her wages to Ma, as her share of expenses. This, as she had prophesied, was more than Fred contributed. She dressed neatly, if quietly. Katie was her constant companion.

Their doings were prosaic—movies, from time to time a theater party in the balcony, some attendants at mediocre dance-places. Under Katie's wise guidance, she learned to tolerate young men, even though she felt little glow from them. They were useful, some of them were companionable, they were necessary.

When she was nineteen, she met through Katie a boy whom she came eventually genuinely to like. He was a year older than she, serious-minded, sensitive and immensely interested in his work. He was a salesman in a musical-instrument house. He played the cornet very badly, and the violin fairly well. He was not affluent, and could not afford lessons from an expensive teacher. His hope was to get ahead far enough to have something to spare for real musical education. His name was Ralph Harley.

Katie at that time had a "steady-guy," Larry Otis, who sold vacuum-cleaners; she treated him with a rough and

hearty camaraderie. Ralph was his cousin. That first evening, the four went to Coney Island.

Larry was, as Katie had promised, a "scream." He seemed completely at home in the clown-costumes which were provided by the management for the protection of clothing. His spontaneous comedy was continuously amusing. He and Katie were an excellent team. Fanny enjoyed herself.

Ralph, in contrast to his buffoon cousin, was appreciative, eager, quiet and shy. He possessed boyishness and a certain appealing unsophistication which was not, on the other hand, by any means "sissy." Fanny decided he was "good-looking"—with certain vague reservations. He was not fresh. She liked him.

It was obvious by the end of the evening that he, on his part, was hard hit. He it was who suggested further parties.

The four became, then, a sort of quadruple entente. They varied organized parties with gatherings at Katie's flat, cooking their own supper, and sitting around afterwards, laughing and "fooling." There was little sentimentality connected with these relations. Katie refused to stop kidding long enough for any dalliance. While Fanny found herself exerting much ingenuity in preventing Ralph from becoming "mushy." As time went on, his devotion to her became an accepted fact. So long as matters did not come to any issue, he was allowed to worship. And she did enjoy his company. Especially she was pleased when he would come calling on a Sunday afternoon, Fred being out, and play on his violin. He played very pretty tunes, like "Heimweh" and Schubert's "Serenade." Why didn't he think he was a very good player right now? Just as good as the ones she heard in the movie-places. Of course, when he tried popular songs, he didn't seem to get just the right kick into it. But classical

things—he did them fine. It was wonderful to lie back on the sofa and close her eyes, and let the music sort of stroke her.

The music forced the issue. On the third occasion of these impromptu concerts, Ma, whom Fanny had thought taking a walk, came out of the kitchen and listened with much enjoyment and loud praise. She asked Ralph to come real often.

After Ralph had left, Ma remarked, "That's the kind of a boy you ought to go with. He's a fine boy. It don't take two looks to see that."

Her mother's approval operated, automatically, in Ralph's disfavor. Further, it encouraged him, two evenings later, into the declaration from which Fanny had so long steered him. Fanny liked him, didn't she? And her mother liked him. Well—where did he stand? He was crazy about her. Wouldn't she marry him—anyway, wouldn't she say she'd marry him when he was making enough to support her decently?

Tactfully and painstakingly, because she enjoyed his companionship, she explained that he was a friend—the very best friend she had. She loved to go around with him. As to anything beyond that—well, she couldn't say it in so many words, but she hadn't ever found anybody whom she could truthfully say she loved. Besides, they were both such kids, and what was the use of deciding anything until he could really support a wife? Just let things go on as they were, being good friends. Oh, yes, it was possible that after a while she might change, but she didn't really think so.

Ralph accepted this sentence in wounded silence. After a while, he assured her that everything was all right. He'd be a friend.

But several nights later, he sent word through Larry that he was sorry, he didn't feel very well, and couldn't go with "the gang" to see the new Mary Pickford picture.

He remained away for over a month. Fanny missed him. She missed his sincerity, his boyish companionability, his music. But it couldn't be helped. She wasn't in love with him, and that was all there was to it. Nor could she ever be, of that she was convinced. He was a nice kid—one of the nicest. But he didn't thrill her at all. He did not, in any manner, fit into the dream she still cherished, of a dashing, strong, heroic man, who was at the same time noble—genuinely noble. Some day such a man would come, riding down the moonlight. . . .

One evening, Ralph came back.

A little sheepishly, he accompanied Larry to the drug-store which was "the gang's" customary rendezvous. They celebrated by making the journey all the way to Manhattan, attending "The Birth of a Nation" as his guests.

He apologized, stutteringly. Fanny informed him that there was nothing to forgive. She was very glad he was willing to be friends.

Things settled down into their ordered routine.

10

Fanny was twenty.

Shortly after her birthday, the mutterings of America's

entry into the World War swelled to a roar. In April, the die was cast.

Fanny was swept at once by flames of patriotism. She accepted without question the propaganda establishing us as the new Crusaders, embarking upon a Holy War to end all wars.

She yearned to participate, herself. She would gladly have joined the Y. W. C. A. forces, or have become a nurse. But there was Ma to look after, especially since it was only a question of time until the draft reached Fred.

By autumn, she had found a steady outlet for her patriotic energies. She gave two hours a night to the big Canteen on Washington Street, near the Eagle Building.

There, her face radiant with zeal, she made sandwiches and coffee untiringly, passed them out to the sailors, marines and regular-army soldiers. As the drafts began to go, she rose at unearthly hours, to send them on their way with a warm breakfast.

The "gang" was broken up. Katie, while sharing little of Fanny's hysterical devotion to the Cause, good-naturedly did her bit in a canteen over in the Brownsville district, near her home. Larry was caught in the first draft, and shipped to Yaphank.

Ralph did not volunteer; he waited for the draft, and told Fanny that when called he would have to ask exemption, since he was the sole support of his mother and small sister.

Fanny told him that she "understood," and sympathized with his position. Nevertheless, she made it clear that, while she appreciated the circumstances, she was disappointed that they were as they were. She found little time to devote to him. She couldn't help feeling ashamed that he was not in uniform.

Wednesday and Saturday nights, the canteen gave dances.

It was patriotic to dance with our brave boys. They could be discouraged from their natural impulses, if you knew the correct methods. And think of the joy you brought into their lives, these young heroes who were going over there, over there, over there to keep the Hun from the Gate, and make the world safe for Democracy.

They were all her heroes; their names, their personalities did not matter. They were her Duty. They were, en masse, her Joy. The uniform made her forgive anything. She was their little Mother.

Then, one Saturday night in November, she was sitting on a chair after a devastating dance with a clumsy and pink-faced gob from Iowa. The door opened. A Marine Sergeant, shining in dress-uniform, mahogany-skinned, strode confidently in.

He paused, and grinned. His eye fell upon her. He stepped forward again, toward her, straight into the deepest recesses of her heart.

Part Two

I

HE STRODE INTO her heart, walking unhesitatingly to where she sat, walking with the touch of swagger, the easy poise of one who has seen many men and many women, and who has knowledge of himself.

The rookies, jammed into that stale-smelling room, jealous, self-conscious and quarrelsome customarily, made room for him, muttering but awed. An officer would have caused an instant embarrassed, uncomfortable cessation of gayety; this was, instead, a non-com—one of them, understandable, but vastly to be respected, by virtue of the huge chevron which gleamed upon his arm, and his manifest ease of the old hand, the poise of the multiple-enlisted regular. One and all, it is probable, loathed him at once; but one and all removed themselves from his path, going about their affairs with sidelong scowls.

All, that is, except the pink-faced gob, who rose slowly to his feet, and with angry bewilderment attempted to edge himself between the Marine and Fanny. She sat silent, motionless, unblinking, searching steadfastly the smiling eyes in the bronzed face leaning toward her.

"I think you and me are goin' to finish this dance," the Marine was stating, as a fact indisputable, inevitable.

"Wait a minute," protested the pink-face, growing suddenly two shades darker, "I ain't through!"

The Marine scanned him in mild surprise. "Why, yes you are, sailor," he said gently. "Didn't you know that? It's time

you was steppin' on somebody else." He leaned closer to Fanny, took her hand, and calmly pulled her upright. "Ain't he funny?" he chuckled, as if sharing with her a private joke, in some foreign language beyond the comprehension of her erstwhile partner, "The little boy don't know when he's through."

The "little boy" topped the Marine by an inch. "Say, listen—you!" he said, pressing his weight against the Marine's shoulder, "How do you get that way?"

The Marine stiffened, grew bodily alert. His gray eyes were like two pebbles, belying the softness still in his voice. "Shucks, sailor," he drawled. "Don't make me go through tellin' you all the ten years o' how I got this way. I'm just a poor, old, gray-headed Marine, that can't beat up more'n six gobs before breakfast these days. Don't be impolite to an old man, sailor."

The sailor shifted his eyes sidewise, gained confidence as he saw two shipmates pushing toward him through the crowd. "Yeh?" his voice rose, "You're some comical guy, you are. I'm dancin' this dance, see?"

The Marine chuckled again. "It does beat all—these kids! Well, thank the good Lord," he said, turning to the two blue-coats who had reached their companion's side, "Here. Take care of your little friend. He's beginnin' to get rude, and my hand ain't well yet from spankin' a gob last Choosday." Quickly he placed his arm about Fanny's waist. "Come on, sister, we got to *do* some dancin'."

The sailor stood wavering. It was clear that he felt himself called upon to make some further demonstration, if only to uphold the dignity of the Navy. His hand shot out and clawed the Marine's elbow.

"Naw, you don't, neither!" he roared, waveringly.

Fanny found expression. Throughout this argument, she had remained as one mesmerized, possessing no will of her own, so immediately dominating had been the Marine's attraction. Now, as if automatically, she said to the sailor, "You come and ask me again, later."

"Certainly, sailor," chimed in the Marine, "About a week later."

He shook off the detaining hand, and steered Fanny into the maelstrom of dancers, leaving the three sailors to glower and discuss vociferously the canine attributes of all Leathernecks.

Between Fanny and the sergeant there were no words. She was glad that he did not speak. She wanted no speech. She wanted nothing to make her think, to prevent her from abandoning herself to the strange beauty in which she seemed immersed. She wanted no analysis. Whether they were dancing well, she did not know, nor did she care. It was enough that the contact of his body was thrilling her as she had not suspected she could be thrilled, that they two were suddenly alone in the loud confusion, remote together, an aloof unit.

She closed her eyes, assured, somehow, that his strength and skill could be relied upon to cope with the crush. She rested her cheek against the cloth of his uniform and the touch soothed her. In her nostrils was its odor, sharp with tobacco and a clean body-smell. It was, to her, a fragrance.

They danced. When the music stopped, they stood and looked at each other. She smiled, a little querulously. He grinned, and his teeth were strong and white. He did not release her hand. He retained it with complete composure, without noticing it, as if it were the most natural gesture

in the world. She felt no wish to remove it. To her, also, it seemed simple and natural.

"I guess it'd be hard to find two people that went together better'n us," he remarked. This was not a compliment; it was a calm statement of fact. She smiled, and nodded her head slowly. Above his temples the hair was tinged with white, contrasting with the rich brown of his skin.

"We seem to get along pretty good all around," he stated. "I sure am glad I blowed in here."

This did not seem to require a reply.

"You supposed to stick around till eleven?" he asked.

"I'm supposed to," she answered.

"Well, it's only ten-thirty, but you must be tired. I'm goin' to take you home."

She found no trace of anything to put her on her guard in this remark. It had, true, a possessive intimation, which she discovered she enjoyed.

"Well—all right," she said.

"It's a real pretty night out," he added. "Get your things."

As they neared the door, the three sailors approached.

"Hey!" said the pink-faced one, in a menacing tone. "How about that dance!"

"Sailor," spoke up the Marine, adjusting his cap with just the right jaunty slight cock over one eye, "I put it up to the lady. Do you want to dance with this lad?"

"It's time I went home," she said, without hesitation. "I'll see you next time."

"There you are, sailor," the Marine grinned, "Now, don't take it hard. They's plenty of girls. Pick one out for yourself." He opened the door for Fanny, and stepped out after her, paying no attention whatever to the sailor's growl.

"Too bad that kid's a deck-walloper," he said. "He

wouldn't make a bad Marine. Now—where do we go? Subway? Street-car? Taxi?"

"It's only about half a mile," she replied, glancing at the crisp stars. "We could walk."

"Like to walk, do you? That's good. We'll have some fine old walks before we get through." He stepped along easily, adapting his stride to hers. It was astonishing that she did not resent his assurance. But, she thought immediately, it wasn't "fresh"; nothing like "fresh"; just natural.

"I walked a-manys the mile in my time," he went on. "I guess they don't make more'n a couple kinds of footin' I ain't tramped on. You work?"

"Yes, stenographer," she answered.

"That's all right," he said, "I get off pretty near every evenin'. You know that recruitin' office right off Times Square? They got me there. Dunno how long for, but a while, anyway. Huh!" he chuckled. "Ain't that me, all over! Can't be satisfied with any girl around God's country. Got to go 'way over to Brooklyn to find one that suits."

Fanny had to answer that. "My! You certainly do work fast! I'm so glad I suit," she said, ironically.

"Don't do that!" he reproached her. "What's the use of sayin' things like that? I liked you right away, and you must of liked me, or you wouldn't be here, would you? And as for workin' fast, I got to make time with a kid as sweet as you are. I s'pose you got a whole flock of these boys hangin' around after you, hey?"

Fanny laughed. "What do you think?"

"Don't make any difference a-tall," he said. "From now on, I'm gonna be the only one that matters."

"You certainly do hate yourself."

"And that don't mean a thing, either," he replied, blandly.

"You don't have to try any more of them lines on me. It ain't like you, and you know it. Now, just be straight with me, and I'll be straight with you. Right now, I know you're different than any kid I ever seen. I knowed it the second I looked at you."

Fanny laughed, but there was reproach in her voice as she protested, "Now, who's using a line? I wish I had a dollar for every girl you said that to before."

"Well, it wouldn't buy much. If it was ten dollars apiece —well, now you're talkin'. Oh, sure I said it before. And you come right down to it, lots of girls is different. But what I mean real different—different than anybody else—why, say—you know you are. What's the use of me arguin' about somethin' that's the plainest thing they is? You're a peach, and a guy'd go a long ways and never run into anybody like you."

Fanny trembled, hoping that there was sincerity in these words that beat upon her with so delicious a sound. After a profound silence she said, not in the slightest flirtatiously, "I'm afraid you must have talked to lots of girls, all right."

"Plenty," he replied, and there was the ring of sincerity in what followed (there was—oh, there was!). "I wouldn't try to fool you. Third hitch in the Marines—calvary before that—(he pronounced it like the place in the Bible, she noticed) punchin' cows before that—well—I ain't ashamed. Nossir. I knowed a plenty girls. Teaches you how to appreciate a real one when they come along."

"Oh," she said, and walked silently.

Crossing the street, a taxi just missed them. To guide her, he grasped her arm in his strong fingers. When they were safe again upon the sidewalk, he continued holding her arm. She was acutely conscious of the pressure. It was de-

lightful. She stole a quick upward glance at him, and found him smiling down at her.

"Gees, you're a dandy kid," he said. "Lessee—to-morrow's Sunday—we'll take a hike. You like Prospect Park?"

"Well, now—," she chided him, "Suppose I have a date?"

"Break it," he returned promptly. "Now ast me somethin' hard. I'll come by for you about three, see?"

"Not at the house?" she said, instantly. (Ma—and Fred! No! Not yet!) "Look. I'll meet you outside Phillips' Drug Store. That's it, over there across the street."

"Ain't ashamed of me, are you?" he grinned.

"Ashamed!" she replied, "You'll understand, later. Half-past three. And don't be late, because I don't ever wait for anybody—not anybody!" They were at the entrance to her flat-building. "This is where I live."

He shook hands with her, gravely. "Gosh, you sure are some sweet kid," he said. "That was a great hunch I had, goin' into that joint. Oh, yeh—and my name's Cary—George Cary."

She laughed, and mimicked him. "Oh, yeh—and my name's Williams—Fanny Williams."

"Well—good-night, Fanny. To-morrow at three, in front of the Drug Store."

"Three-thirty," she corrected. "Good-night, Sergeant Cary."

He chuckled, "Sergeant, huh? Well, we'll forget that pretty soon. S'long."

She ran up the stairs, stopped at the landing, and smiled secretly in the darkness.

All her life she had waited. Now he was here.

It was as simple as that.

2

They strolled in the park, and intimacy grew.

The spell of Indian summer, flaming with moribund colors, worked romance about them.

On Tuesday night they sat in a movie, their hands clasped.

Wednesday evening, at the Canteen, she awaited him anxiously. She danced dutifully, but completely without zest, until, resting against the coffee-counter, she heard a voice, somehow familiar, and turned to encounter a Jewish face, all a-grin.

"Look who's here! The little wild-cat!" the voice said. "Ain't forgot me, have you?"

It was Zippo Rozinsky, trim and neat in sailor's garb, his easy manner bespeaking considerable familiarity with the service. He bubbled with friendliness. Her repugnance was immediately disarmed.

"You're lookin' great," he continued. "Always did say you had the makin's of a swell-looker. Well, well—the world do move!"

He launched upon a detailed description of his career since that bygone fracas with Marshall, telling how he and Butch had bummed Southward, Butch had been killed in a railroad accident, he himself had joined the Navy in New Orleans, was now serving his second enlistment, wished he could get another crack at that football sap—maybe he'd stand up and fight like a man this time—and thought this

was a swell chance to beg her pardon for "kissin' her that way"—though he'd "tell the world he had good taste, anyway." He was sorry for "bein' so rough about it," he finished gayly, and look, she could still see the claw marks on his jaw if she looked real hard.

"I always tell 'em that's a battle-scar," he added, "and I'm proud of it. I am, too. I like a girl that sticks up for herself. You done just right, and I'm glad you did. You give me a good lesson—not to bother a girl if she don't want you to. Do you forgive me? Shake on it?"

So charged with respect and friendly admiration was he that she willingly gave her forgiveness. As she shook his hand, George appeared at her elbow.

Zippo hailed him at once. "Well, if it ain't! Hello, there, Cary! How's old One-punch?"

"Howdy, Zippo," George made answer, heartily, "I see you ain't dead yet. Know my friend Miss Williams, do you?"

He stood close to Fanny, with a proprietary air not blatant, but instructive to the sharp-eyed sailor.

"I'll say!" he barked, "Holy cow! The lesson she gimme one time! They ain't been but one other that meant as much, and that was what you handed me that time down in Cuba. What a sock that was—what a sock!"

"That was mostly luck and experience," said George. "You ought to of had me, by rights."

"I dunno about the luck, but I'll say it was usin' your head," answered Zippo, and turned to Fanny, doing a comic "Oy!" and wagging his face with his hands. His admiration for the Marine was evident. "We was puttin' on a bout when the *Somerset* and the *Tennessee* was at Guantanamo. Me for the Navy, him for the Marines, see? Well, I sure had him

goin' the first four rounds, didn't I, Sarge? Yes I did—not. That was just his old foxy tricks."

"Oldest trick in the world," George said, deprecatingly, "didn't think it would fool you."

"I thought I was pretty doggone good, you see?" Zippo continued explaining to Fanny, "and it looked reasonable I had him groggy. Well, I get careless, see, and I open up to try for one on the button. I started one from the floor, and pow! What a smack! That pore old wreck come to life and clapped me under the chin, and the next thing I knowed was the doc sayin' 'there, I guess he's come to, finely.' Yea, bo! I got to thank you for not losin' a fight since."

"Well, glad I could do somethin' for my country," laughed George.

"Wisht I could get another shot at you," Zippo said, earnestly, "I still got a lot to learn, and you're the guy that could show me."

"Well drop up to the Recruitin' station—near Times Square—you know. Maybe we can get a minute or so in the Y. You got to promise to go easy on me, though. I ain't so young as I used to be."

"Yeh?" Zippo burst into a guffaw, "I s'pose I'm goin' to fall for that cripple stuff again! I'll see if I can't get around there, at that. Don't know, though. I'm on the *Texas,* you see, and we're liable to shoot out any time."

"Make it late some afternoon," George said, with a smiling look toward Fanny, "I can't always get away after supper."

"I get you," guffawed Zippo again, "all right, Big Boy. Glad I seen you,—Fanny, ain't it? This Cary, here—he's all right. Only live Marine I ever seen that didn't make me sick to my stummick."

He swung away.

As she began to dance with George, her eyes glistened, and she choked with pride. A man among men—a real man! Respected and admired.

3

It was as he was leaving that evening that she knew for the first time what a kiss could mean.

Twice before, he had kissed her hastily, playfully, in semi-public. Now they were alone.

Walking home, she had joked about Zippo's attempt of years before. George had listened in an almost silent solemnity. He kept looking at her.

He followed her into the dark seclusion of her vestibule, and closed the door after them. His arms went about her, his lips found hers.

To her, it was as if they were melting into each other, they were fused by a white-hot flame, in her ears was a far-off music drawing nearer, nearer. Time was erased, it ceased to measure. No fears, no modesties, no barriers remained. She abandoned herself to ecstasy. She died, he had killed her with wonder and fire.

Consciousness returned. She sighed, a trembling sigh that rose from deep within her. She felt George trembling against her. Heavy-lidded, she searched his eyes in the dimness. They were troubled.

"Gosh—baby—" he said, haltingly, "do you love me that much?"

She smiled languorously, her voice was weighted when at last she spoke, as if to herself, "Nobody—before—"

With something of alarm, as well as incredulity, he whispered, "What? You mean nobody—you didn't kiss nobody before?"

"Not like that!" she answered.

"My sweet baby," he murmured, "Innocent baby," his tones were a croon.

She lifted her mouth to his again. His hands bruised her, with a hurt that was beauty. She lost identity, he was she, she was he. The immense music roared intolerably.

A faint sound of footsteps came from the steps two floors above. They were descending.

"Quick," she said, "you have to go."

She pulled him outside the door.

"Dearest!" she said, "Now, please go, please!"

"All right, baby," he answered, "to-morrow?"

"Yes, of course." She pushed him.

He strode off down the street.

She passed quickly into the house, and started up the stairs. At the first turning, she encountered Fred.

"Well," he remarked, "this is a hell of a time to come draggin' home!"

"It's only eleven," she answered easily, "and it's none of your business."

He grunted, "Thanks, I s'pose you got all your pretty little soldiers tucked in, huh? Yeh. Well, leave the front door open. I'm just goin' out for a pack of Camels, and I can't find my key."

He slouched on down the steps.

Rapt in her dream, she did not hear his words.

He cursed fluently, half an hour later, when he was forced to ring the bell repeatedly.

"And what the hell is so funny?" he said, glowering at her placid smile, "God, you get dumber and dumber!"

4

The dream held.

Three weeks passed. They were together constantly, almost daily. They experienced no more embarrassments at the Canteen; after some desultory comment, he became known there as "Fanny's Marine"—something in the nature of an institution in those days when nothing apparently had more than a moment's stability. He called for her, and no one presumed to interfere.

When they found leisure, they went on little silly excursions, which, colored by her mental attitude, were transformed for Fanny into magnificent adventures.

One night they rode back and forth on the ferry to Hoboken for two hours. He procured a pass, one afternoon, to visit a friend who was in barracks on Governor's Island, and took her with him. She rejoiced in the illusion of a trip with him to remote lands. They visited the Statue of Liberty, so that she could see it "real close." He was vastly amused at her disappointed contention that the heroic figure resembled "a fat wash-woman turning out the gas." And one Sunday,

they crossed the river at Dyckman Street to the Palisades, where he cooked a complete meal of coffee, bacon and eggs, and flapjacks, serving it in an army mess-kit which he had expropriated in his Cavalry days.

It was all very astonishing and unreal and rapturous. She moved through it in a trance, asking few questions either of him or of herself. She poured out upon him without stint the love that she had kept stored up for someone shadowy, dimly hoped-for.

Sometimes she wondered if he would not tire of innocuous diversions and of—hesitation. A man of his experience, the women he had known—would there not come some moment when passion would overstep the bounds, when he would demand the irrevocable?

For he must know that she would be able to deny him nothing. And she had continual incontrovertible proofs of her power to waken in him dark, violent urgings, elemental as the Bahaman hurricanes he had described to her. Why, then, did he preserve the delicate balance between voluptuous appreciation and consummation?

She sensed that, to him, she was indeed an experience altogether new—that he spoke with deep sincerity when he told her, repeatedly, that she was "different." She saw vaguely that, used as he was to easy accessibility, to ready complaisance, to "girls who had been there before," her virginity awed him and was at the same time precious and alluring. Her personality delighted him; her body inflamed him; yet there is a certain type of rake in whom the confronting of authentic virtue brings to the surface a strange chivalry, an inviolable protectiveness.

Feeling all this, adoring what she termed his "nobility," she abandoned herself to his conception of honor. She loved

completely. She put her trust in him. Whatever might happen, theirs was a relation lifted far, far above the realms of ordinary conventions, ordinary morals.

That was her conviction. Hence she resented much more than necessarily a certain flippancy on the part of Katie. Disapproval from Ma, nagging by Fred she was capable of coping with, it would have been normal. Luckily, Ma was at the time overwhelmed by a new increase of dressmaking orders, and her attention was filled with plans for handling it. While Fred was blatantly in love with a half-baked but well-meaning young neighbor named Zelda Morris, and divided his off-time between squiring her and dodging the draft which had already called him once before its board. Fanny suffered no molestations from those quarters.

But she was not prepared for Katie's casual jokings. That shrewd and buxom cynic commented on one occasion concerning Fanny's "wool-gathering" at the office.

Fanny, secure in her knowledge that she was performing her tasks with her usual mechanical precision, inquired with some asperity whether she "didn't have a right to her own thoughts?"

Katie shrugged her shoulders, and tittered, artificially.

The next day she invited Fanny to eat at the Luncheonette. As they consumed chocolate sodas and tomato-salad sandwiches, Katie switched suddenly from small-talk.

"Kid," she announced. "I been lookin' at you a lot, lately. I never seen you look so pretty in your life."

"Pretty? Honest?" Fanny paused in mid-bite.

"You ain't a bad-lookin' girl anyhow," Katie conceded, "but the last few days I swear, you look like you swallowed a electric light. Yeh, and gimme three guesses what's doin' it?"

Fanny blushed. She looked up at Katie sidewise, but said nothing.

"I s'pose I was born day before yestiddy," continued Katie, benevolently fierce. "Tryin' to fool Auntie, hey? Come on out of the bushes, now. What's he like?"

Fanny choked on the bite. Finally she submitted, in a low voice, "He's—he's wonderful!"

"Can these be true!" Katie said with sarcasm, "My, that sure is a new way of puttin' it. Well, go on, go on. Who is he? You ain't gone and got crazy about pore little Ralphie, have you?"

Fanny answered immediately, with indignation, "I should say not! Ralph!"

Katie waited for further illumination. None coming, she pursued, "All right, let's have it. Somebody new? A soldier?"

(Oh, well—why be silly?) She came out with it, flatly. "His name is George Cary, and he's a Marine Sergeant."

"A marine? Yeh?" Katie munched thoughtfully for several seconds.

When she spoke again, it was slowly and with solemnity, "Well—remember what I always say: 'Never trust a Marine above your shoe-strings.'"

Fanny dropped her sandwich and stared at Katie. Her face blanched with offense. "Katie!"

Her friend was surprised.

"Oh, say—listen, kid! Gee, I'm sorry—I didn't mean anything. Aw, now—don't get sore. I was just tryin' to be smart."

Fanny, in stubborn silence, picked up her purse, and prepared to descend from her stool.

Katie stopped her, "Aw, wait now, Fan. I don't know what made me so dumb. It's only marines—you know—

they got quite a reputation—I thought you'd understand I was just kiddin'."

Fanny relented somewhat. "There's some things you don't like to kid about—"

"Didn't I tell you I was only foolin'? I oughta known better. Of course he ain't like the rest of 'em."

"No!" Fanny agreed with asperity.

"And of course it means a lot to you." Katie continued, "And I didn't have any business to get smart about it. That's the trouble with me, you see—none of 'em make any difference to me, and I forget that some takes 'em serious."

"I thought *you'd* understand, anyway," Fanny said. "It serves me right. I guess there isn't anybody—" She started toward the cashier's desk.

Katie paid the check, and caught up with Fanny. She grasped her firmly by the arm.

"Now I'm goin' to get sore in a minute. Cut out that kind of talk. I'm your pal, ain't I? Well, I am, and I'm makin' you a promise right now. Listen. I ain't never goin' to get smart again with you. See? Now forget it, and tell me you ain't sore."

Fanny thought a moment. Then reluctantly she replied. "All right. I'll forget it."

"And you ain't sore! Come on, say you ain't! I'll give you a good slap!" She threatened Fanny in burlesque, one hand held ferociously aloft.

Despite herself, Fanny laughed. "No—no. I'm not sore."

"That's my pal!" chortled Katie, throwing her arm over the slim girl's shoulders. "Now—ain't you ashamed of makin' a fuss? How about lettin' me look him over some time? I bet he's a crack-a-jack, hey? What you say we fix up a party?"

"Well—maybe some time," Fanny replied, without entire enthusiasm.

"Sometime soon, hey, Fan? Honest, you know—I'm as interested as if it was me—darn sight more, yeh, I should say so. Gosh, I wouldn't of hurt you for anything, kid."

Her face was so sincere, and her tone was so genuine that Fanny gave her hand a quick squeeze. "I know," she said. "And wait till you do see him. You'll see how it is—I mean, regular things you think about people don't fit with him."

"I betcha!" answered Katie, pushing the door open with a hearty bang, "Bein' in love does marvelous things to you, kid. It must be grand."

Fanny simply smiled.

5

Thanksgiving afternoon, the meeting occurred. Fanny and Katie were taken to the matinee by George and another Marine from the recruiting office, a corporal with a loud voice and an exaggerated sense of humor.

Katie immediately disapproved of her own swain, and spent the first half-hour putting him in his place. After that, the two sat in angry silence.

Silence, too, was a cloak upon Fanny and George, but it was a cloak of romance. The show was "Maytime," an operetta of sweet despair, of melodic sadness. Someone's voice, of crystal limpidity, floated effortlessly up to the balcony. Fanny was blinded by comfortable tears.

"Sweetheart—sweetheart—sweetheart—
Will you—love me—ever?—"

She clung to his hand in the darkness, identifying herself completely with the girl on the stage, who was asking with such supreme loveliness the age-old question.

George cleared his throat several times, and swallowed stiffly. His grasp on her fingers tightened.

"—Will you remember
Springtime—lovetime—May?"

Though the winter was already sending its bleak messengers up the streets outside, Fanny felt that it was May in her heart—Springtime—lovetime—always, because George was beside her—would always be beside her. She wept, quietly, frankly.

(Saccharine, sentimental, magic, this song—the "Goodbye Dolly Grey" of the A.E.F. In how many a faraway billet, upon how many a mud-sogged trench-step—)

In the theater-lobby, afterward, Katie announced her withdrawal from the party. She told the corporal frankly that he "gave her a pain in the what-you-call-it" and she would go home by herself.

He replied that he was exceedingly pleased, because he had a date with a real jane—a live one.

Fanny waited, immersed in the spell, while George went to buy a copy of the song.

Katie whispered in her ear, "You didn't tell me the half of it! He sure is one peach!"

"Well—if *you* think so—," Fanny whispered back, with gladness.

"You tell 'em!" Katie said aloud, with enthusiasm. Then she added, with a touch of dubiousness, "Only—"

"Only what?" Fanny was immediately fierce.

"He's awful good-lookin'," Katie finished. Then, since George had returned, she said, "Thanks a lot, Sarge. Glad to of met you. Come on, Stupid, leave 'em alone. Be funny some more, and put me on the Subway."

She dragged the infuriated Corporal away.

"I don't care when we eat," announced Fanny, "Let's walk across Brooklyn Bridge. We had such a big dinner."

"Sure," he agreed with alacrity. "I done some swell fork fatigue myself."

As their heels rang upon the sidewalk, she spoke again. "Besides, that show—it makes me feel like I didn't need anything more to eat for a week. I feel—full, don't you?"

He wagged his head in admiration, "Doggone it, baby! You sure do say the cutest things! Bing—the old nail on the head, every time. Why can't I talk like that?"

"Oh, you!" she answered, shy with happiness. She knew he was speaking sincerely. She was well aware that her saying "cute things" was one of her unaccountable, miraculous attractions for him. Surely what she had just said was nothing extraordinary. Yet he judged it so, and it must be true. She simply said what she thought. It was her fortune that he found the thoughts amazing.

They chattered of the play. "Wasn't he—?" "Wasn't she?"—"But didn't you think—?"—"And then, when he—"

Midway across the bridge, they hung over the rail, their

talk subdued. He had been telling of Chinese plays in Cuba, of a native troupe in Haiti who were so funny because they talked French without any negro accent—"Can y' imagine—all black, and still you couldn't tell 'em from regular Frogs, listenin' to 'em!"

His arm was firmly around her shoulders. A lump rose in her throat as she watched, in the dimness, the little muscles working at his temples, under the incongruously mature gray edge of his hair. The rest so black—just that white edge. Pa's hair must have begun to turn exactly that way. Love for him welled up so strongly that she forced herself to a contemplation of the Manhattan skyline, the long panoply of jeweled buildings, dimly-lit this holiday.

For several minutes they leaned, mute.

Finally, softly she said, "Castles . . . like 'over there.' . . ."

A fear shot through her. She turned and faced him. "Will you have to go—soon? What did the Captain say?"

He grinned easily. "Didn't I tell you? We're fixed right here, recruitin'. Got to get more Marines, baby. Don't you worry."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, happily. Then, "Oh," in a different tone.

"What's the matter, baby? You sound like you was disappointed. Of course, I can always get transferred—"

"No! No!" she interrupted. "Only—it seems as if I'm so selfish—wanting to keep you here—when the war—"

"Don't you fret, hon. What good would one poor old Sergeant do? They can use me a lot better tellin' boys how grand it is to be a Marine. Say, you oughta hear me spillin' my talk. I had a pal oncet that was out three years with Doc

Foster's Mammoth Medicine Show. What I didn't learn from him ain't in the book."

"Can I listen some time?" she asked, seriously.

He burst into a laugh. "Haw-haw! You take the cookie, baby! Here I go runnin' on, braggin'—here, give us a kiss!" He kissed her with a heartiness which was all affectionate amusement, then, still chuckling, pulled her from the rail. They set off again across the bridge.

She spoke little, hurt by his lightness. He was voicing an appreciation of Katie— "Hot sketch, all right. Not what you'd call any Theda Bara,—more like this—now—Mabel Norman, if you know what I mean. Only bigger, hey? Don't blame her for not takin' to that boob—I only got hold of him because he's the only one around the office that ain't signed up regular with some dame. I'm glad you got a good side-kicker like her. . . ."

She closed herself within her own thoughts.

(This beautiful, beautiful day—it mustn't end in laughter and casual discussions— "I love you so! I love you so!"—his arms about me, his lips—"sweetheart, sweetheart, sweetheart"—love's all that matters—the castle gates flew open, my knight upon a milk-white charger, cutting his way to the sleeping princess—make the world safe for democracy—so brave, so straight, so strong—to have him hurt me—oh, take me. I belong to you, my knight—)

She led the way to a bench within the shadow of the bridge's pier. "Let's rest a while," she said.

Then she was half-lying against him, bearing his precious weight upon her, and passion was a madness, a holy savagery of desire. . . .

Suddenly, he was pushing her from him, he sat holding his head in his hands, groaning aloud, "I can't! I can't!"

As she started to speak, he continued, muttering, "No, no, I couldn't! You're such a sweet kid—you're so decent!"

He leaped to his feet, took several steps away, stood clenching his hands. She clung to the bench, helpless, a knife of fear tearing her. Maybe he didn't love her as she loved him!

He was back in a moment, his face working, stumbling over words. He took her hands in his, and stared into her eyes.

"Don't you see, baby—Jesus, why can't I say it right—you're a *good* girl—"

She waited, scarcely breathing.

"You're a *good* girl!" he repeated. "Don't you see? I never—I been hard-boiled—the women I had—all of 'em—you're the only decent—oh, hell—"

(Oh! It's always me he's thinking about—me! My knight!)

Still the fumbling words, "I ain't fit—I shouldn't never of—I ain't the marryin' kind—but I'm so crazy about you—"

"I love you," she said, steadily.

Now his voice took on firmness. "I guess I'm a rotten bet, baby," he said. "I been a bum, all right. But I'll try to change. Will you get married with me?"

"Oh, George! As if you had to ask me that!"

Her head was on his shoulder. Peace was a benediction upon them.

"You're makin' a man outa me," he said, after a little while, tenderly humorous, "just think of me bein' decent, and—and not goin' ahead."

"Hush," she said. "Who said you aren't decent? I'm glad we—we didn't. But it was you that was decent."

"Go wan!" he stroked her hair. "My little innocent baby!

You just lost your head. You'd of hated me all the rest of your life. But now you're goin' to love me, ain't you?"

"Forever and ever," she replied, as one says a prayer.

And, later almost to herself, "Mrs.—George—Cary!"

He drove the breath from her with his embrace.

"You get me crazy, baby! You get me crazy! It's goin' to be tough to wait! But—thank God I had the sense!"

(Thank God! Because now he's mine, forever and ever and ever! My knight!)

"Will we have to wait long?" she inquired, timidly.

"No, by God!" he answered, "I don't know how long I could stand it! The way you burn me up, baby!"

She was thoughtful for a full minute. She shuddered.

"You'll have to meet Ma, I s'pose. And Fred."

"Sure! Why not? Any time you say!"

"We—we won't let on anything."

"All right—you're the doctor."

"It'll be just our secret. Then we'll get married, and tell them afterwards."

"O. K. with me, sweetheart."

"They're—I don't know how to say it. Fred's awful. Ma's all right—but she—she don't understand me."

"That's all right, baby. I'll handle 'em."

"To-morrow, then? Come for supper?"

"Sure. Now, has my baby got all her worries off her chest?"

They sat in calm communion.

Eventually they made their way home, hand in hand, among the dull buildings that were silvered by the spotlight moon, transformed, now, into turrets and buttresses.

6

The introduction to her family was far less difficult than Fanny had anticipated.

True, Fred, passing her in the hall before eating, whispered, "So you fell for a uniform, huh? I was wonderin' how long it'd be." He maintained his hostility throughout the evening, but confined it principally to glum silence.

Ma, on the other hand, exhibited a hospitality which was both gratifying and vaguely disturbing to Fanny. Usually, Ma paid small attention to her children's friends, masculine or feminine. But now she made what Fanny recognized as special efforts to draw him out.

This was disturbing, because she had taken great pains to describe him, perfunctorily, as "just one of the boys she met at the Canteen." She had invited service men for meals before, and Ma had gone through with it cheerfully enough, but as a duty. This was far different. Her manner made it obvious to Fanny that she was making it an Occasion.

"Darn it! You can't ever fool Ma!" she thought, in reluctant admiration, "I don't care. What's it matter? I wish she didn't seem to like him, though. Does she, or doesn't she? I wonder what she's up to? She can't do anything! He's mine! He's mine!"

But then, how could anybody help liking George? Except Fred, of course. But that was natural, too. If a person was

nice, that was the very reason Fred wouldn't like him. And George was at his best, immaculate, shining, easy of bearing, confident, charming.

He had made an attempt to interest Fred by jocularly suggesting the Marines as a great career. Fred sneered, and George, under the guise of persuading him, expanded on the service, addressing himself in reality to Ma.

There was no boasting in his manner as he held forth. Simply a series of anecdotes, laughingly told, and explanation of a Marine's pride in the Corps and his self-respect for being an efficient member of it. The recital was not a "showing-off." It had charm, it had manliness, it had humor, it had strength. It had little effect upon Fred.

Ma, however, listened with appreciation, asked intelligent questions, and relaxed her grimness into smiles at intervals.

After supper, Fred managed to contrive a semblance of heartiness in his "Glad to meet you," and departed to take Zelda to the movies.

George remained half an hour longer, talking about his ideas of what America's entrance into the war was accomplishing—ideas more optimistic than accurate, but interesting.

Finally, Fanny reminded him of her required attendance at the Canteen.

"Hope you'll come around real often with Fanny," Ma said, at the door, "I don't know when I laughed so much. You had a very interestin' life, Mr. Cary."

On the stairs, George kissed Fanny, and said, "Well, how about it, baby? Did I get by all right?"

"You were wonderful!" Fanny answered, adoringly.

"Your brother don't seem to be so crazy about me," he remarked, in a tone which indicated complete indifference.

"What does he matter? He's a fool!"

"Well—I wouldn't go so far as to say that. But the Marines would do him a lot more good than he'd do to the Marines. Your Ma, though—she's a good sketch. Nothin' like what you made me think."

"I don't know what to make of it," Fanny replied in a puzzled voice, "I never saw her as nice as she was to-night. It's very peculiar." She knitted her brows, as she swung down the sidewalk with him. "I guess it's just you, George! My—my! The way you have with women!"

"Give it a drink," he said, deprecatingly, "it's only little fool girls like you that think I'm anything swell."

They laughed together.

7

Fanny was putting on her wraps next morning, preparatory to leaving for the office Ma said, "I like that Mr. Cary. Where did you say you met him?"

"*Sergeant* Cary," Fanny corrected without animus, "At the Canteen."

"Sergeant, then. He's a very interestin' young man."

"Smart-aleck Marine louse!" growled Fred.

"He could throw you over the buildin' with one hand," Ma said, serenely. Then she turned again to Fanny. "Very interestin.' Bring him around again."

"All right," Fanny answered, going through the door.

"I will, don't you fear," she said aloud, as she climbed aboard the streetcar, "but I'll see that you don't get any chance to go interfering. What are you after, anyway?"

"Me?" ejaculated the startled conductor. "Put your fare in the box!"

"Oh!" laughed Fanny, dropping coins.

8

Two weeks flew past. The stores were gay with Christmas festoons, the strained gayety of a nation at war defied dismal reports from overseas.

Mr. Magnus, Fanny's boss, was appointed one of the "Three-Minute-Men," and made frequent talks about the Liberty Bond issues. She, as the quickest transcriber in the office, accompanied him on most of these occasions, taking down his words, and later sending copies of them to the *Eagle* and the *Times*.

He fell into the habit of discussing his speeches with her. He prided himself upon his ability to think upon his fee, and he made it a point never to repeat his "messages" on subsequent appearances. He asked embarrassing questions involved with her opinion of their effect upon the audiences.

She could not tell him that she thought them tiresome and lacking in fire. Therefore, she always evaded the issue by praising him for giving so much of his valuable time to his country.

His pompousness as well as his genuine wish to help were pathetic to her. He was a nice, harmless, pitiful old thing. He told her, one evening, that he wished he were young, or that he had a son, so that he could "get into the thick of it," or "give my son." Another time, he produced from his pocket, with a flick as if it were a rabbit, a photograph.

"My brother," he said, "he's a colonel in the Canadians. Lives in Toronto, you know. (She knew; often she had taken down letters addressed to that brother, evidently a rich lawyer.) Been over more than a year. Not killed yet, anyhow. Wild man. Smart. So—I've given somebody."

Fanny smiled inwardly with irony, at the word "give." She examined the photograph. A handsome, dashing face, in the late thirties, she judged. It had a strange familiarity, somehow.

"Taken three years ago," Mr. Magnus was saying, "he's forty. We stay young in our family."

Fanny, relating the incident to George, giggled over Mr. Magnus' "youth."

"Them Canucks is good fighters, they tell me," was his comment, "but listen, baby, this old windbag is sure cuttin' into our time."

"Hush, now," she soothed him. "Maybe it does some good. And pretty soon we'll have a lot of our time together!"

"You said it, hon," he agreed, "and let's hurry up about it."

"Yes, my birthday."

"What? 'Way into January? A whole month—more'n a month? What do you think I'm made outa?"

"Oh, George! I know. But the flat—the one Katie showed me—we can't get it till the fifteenth of January—"

"What of it? They's plenty of other flats—"

"Oh— Stupid! Not anywhere near as cute—and so cheap, too."

"Well—the fifteenth, then. Gosh, think of me—a married man! Listen, baby, what do you want for Christmas?"

"Oh, now—you promised you wouldn't waste money on presents. I'm not going to get you a thing."

"But listen, kid—that's all right about you not gettin' me anything—but me—listen, I got a grand idear—"

"Stop! We'll need all our money." She shut off his further protest with a kiss.

Such was the trend of their conversation most of those blissful days.

Meanwhile, he came habitually to her home to call for her, but she saw to it that he was not exposed to Fred's petty insolence, nor to Ma's possible pryings.

Fred made no bones of his dislike. Ma was increasingly cordial. She referred to him as "your sergeant Cary," apparently without undue emphasis. Fanny, after some uneasiness, came to the conclusion that Ma was not displeased at her having a steady beau, but did not suspect the closeness of their intimacy. She, herself, discussed George not at all with either of them.

Ma was not in the least deceived. The Saturday before Christmas, she sat, straining her eyes in the late afternoon gloom, sewing and worrying over her daughter, whom, despite the girl's aloofness, she loved with a hard, hidden yearning.

The door open, and Fred slouched in, with the greeting, "Is Fan back yet?"

"You know she's down to the Canteen," Ma answered.

"Oh, sure," Fred sneered. "Makin' the world safe for us soldiers, huh? Well, wait'll she hears my news."

Ma said, calmly, "You seen the draf' board, did you? Well, what did they say?"

"They says your letter was the bunk. Old Morgan says I'm a liar—I ain't the sole support of you and Fan—says he knows all about us, and you make more'n I do, with your dress-makin'. That's fine, that is!"

Ma shrugged her shoulders. "Well, of course, if I'd ever thought I could keep you out of the army by starvin' to death—"

"Is that a joke? Well, anyways, I got to go, and I'm glad the two of youse'll have plenty to live on. . . . I won't need to worry."

Ma grunted sarcastically. "Yes, that'll be a big load off your mind. So they's no way of gettin' out of it? When do you leave?"

"Next week. Say, what's the idea goofin' me about it? I'm perfectly willin' to go, now I can get the right kind of work."

"Work? Oh—I thought soldiers was supposed to fight."

Fred waxed patient and oratorical, "Who said they didn't? They's fightin' and fightin'. Some shoot and carry a barenit, and then they's the ones that makes it possible for 'em to shoot. For every man on the line of fire they's got to be five—maybe it was six—six men supplyin' him. And the ones in back is just as valyouble as the ones up front—every bit. Old Morgan says so."

Ma chuckled mirthlessly. "I knowed you must of hit on somethin' easy. Trust you to get out of danger."

"All right, get sarcastical," replied her son, unperturbed. "Any goof can stand up and get knocked off. They need the valyouble ones for the jobs that takes brains. Now me—I know book-keepin' and all the questions they ast me about woolen shirts and socks and underwear—why, they said I was just made for the quartermaster."

Ma interrupted. "Quartermaster? What's that?"

"Supplies—supplies!" Fred explained, impatiently. "Say—pretty soft! While them other poor rummies are up there catchin' a bullet in their pants, I'll be back in a nice com-

fortable warehouse, dealin' out shoes and smokes. One of the birds says maybe I wouldn't have to go overseas at all. Why, I might even get a commission."

Ma was unimpressed. "You mean get to be a sergeant, like Mr. Cary? I'd like to see you."

"Sergeant? How do you get that way?" Fred burst out. "Lootenant, or even a captain!" He chuckled savagely. "Gosh, wouldn't that be the goods—givin' orders to that big fish, Cary, that's been in uniform since God was a boy, and ain't ever got further than a sergeant. Wow!"

Ma punctured the dream. "You ain't a captain yet. I wouldn't try givin' him any orders till you are. He might get rough."

Fred hopped up and down with anger. "That's swell! My own mother stickin' up for him against me! Gees, you women! Fan's a sap; she'd fall in love with a mule, if it was an army mule. But you have to go makin' me feel cheap, takin' his side. Ain't you sick of seein' his mush around?"

Ma sewed quietly. "No, not exactly. It all depends what he's up to. I know these romantical, wanderin' men. I ain't sure he's good for Fanny, that's all."

"It ain't any mystery to me. Once a soldier, always a bum. If you'd let me handle him—"

"Yes," Ma agreed, "you're just the one. Then you can get drafted right out of the hospital—"

"Is that so?" Fred snarled, "I ain't scared of him. These here reg'lar army guys—scum of the earth! Why, they didn't use to let 'em in a decent saloon! Scared—huh!"

"All right. I'll pretend to believe you," Ma said, wearily, "now run over to see Zelda. Mr. Cary's comin' early. I ast him to. I don't want you around messin' things up."

"I'll talk to him, the big bum!" announced Fred.

Ma looked him up and down with immense patience. Then she abandoned her sewing, and spoke carefully, with fatigue.

"I s'pose I got to explain. All right. Opposin' him to Fanny would just send her right smack at him. Shut up—don't you butt in on me. And maybe he don't mean any harm. That's what I'm tryin' to find out. Might be he's serious, and might be he's just the right man for her. I'd be happy if he was."

Fred could not hold his peace longer. He shouted. "Him!"

"I don't say he is, and I don't say he ain't. Anyways, I know the sort. Your Pa—well, never mind. Whether you trust 'em or not, you can't help likin' 'em."

"You know any more funny stories? I can't help likin' him, can't I? The stuck up bum!"

Ma shook her head, sadly. "Well, you ain't a woman, and especially you ain't Fanny, with her head all full of crazy, romantical notions. I say, he's fascinatin', and I mean it. Don't forget I lost all my sense once, and got married to your Pa—well, what's the use of talkin' about it? Go on, now, get out to Zelda's before he comes."

"Aw, keep your shirt on," Fred answered, "Zelda ain't home yet." The last of the sentence was drowned by the doorbell's ring.

"There!" Ma said, rising, "you act like a human bein' to him, and you keep your mouth shut to Fanny, understand?" She hastened to the door, which she opened.

"Yes, ma'am," George said, as he followed her into the room, "sorry I was late, only I had to go to the Navy Yard a minute." He saw the sullen Fred, and hailed him cheerfully, "Hello, Williams. Comin' over and let us sign you up in the Marines?"

Fred, nastily, replied, "Naw. I'm goin' in a real service—the army."

"Set down, Sergeant," Ma pointed at a chair, glaring surreptitiously at Fred.

"Thanks," George sat, and smiled lazily at Fred, "that's fine. No accountin' for tastes, like the fella says. What branch—Q. M.?"

"What's that—Quartermaster?" Fred's surprise showed, "how'd you know?"

In the tone of one paying a high compliment, George said, "I'm used to sizin' people up. The minute I looked at you, I says to myself, 'That there fella was just born for the Underwood Artillery.'"

Fred was puzzled and suspicious. "Underwood Artillery?" he repeated.

"That's a pet name the doughboys have for the Q. M. You picked the right service. Well, good luck, and any tips I can give you—"

"I guess I can take care of myself," Fred interrupted, ungraciously.

"All right, Fred. Clear out. We got business to talk over," Ma cut the colloquy short.

Reluctantly, Fred departed, leaving Ma looking at George not unkindly but keenly.

George grinned, as Ma, after a few seconds of inspection, came directly to the point. "Now, George, I'm goin' to talk straight out. You ain't any boy, you're a grown man. And you better tell me the truth."

George settled back in his chair, and chuckled. "Fire away, ma'am. Outright and downright—that's me."

Ma nodded approvingly. "Now. George Cary your real

name?" He nodded, his eyes twinkling. "Ever been in jail?"

"Oh—guardhouse, of course. Nothin' else."

"Married?"

"No—ma'am!" His answer was emphatic.

She continued her questions, he answered with perfect good-nature. Thirty-two years old,—born in Prophetstown, Ill., on the Rock River—pigs and corn, corn and pigs—get up, work, go to bed—not for him! His old man was always "slappin' the taste out of his mouth," too. So he got out—ran away out West with his brother, Bill, when they were sixteen and fifteen, respectively—punched cows in Wyoming for three years—a "hitch in the calvary," toward the end of which "Bill busted his neck, and I didn't feel like reënlistin', so I worked quite a spell in a garage in San Diego. I'm a good auto mechanic, when I want to be."—Joined the Marines eight years before, stuck to them.

"I guess I seen a lot of places," he finished, "San Domingo, Haiti, Cuba, Egypt, China—shucks. Went back home last year for a couple of days. You'd-a thought all I been through wasn't half as much as Pa spendin' Sunday in Peoria. Oh, well—some folks is built for stayin' home. Some's otherwise."

"Yep. You don't have to tell me," Ma agreed. Then, after a long silence, she leaned forward. "I guess you had lots of experiences with women?"

"I ain't ever been any tin saint, ma'am," George answered, honestly, "But I ain't never had any diseases—never sick a day, barrin' a touch of malaria I got once in La Guayra."

Ma sat back. "I'm glad you ain't a hypocrite. I can't stand that. And I know you're the kind of man that women fall

in love with. I know, all right. Well—sure you ain't got any wives anywheres?"

George answered instantly, "No thanks. Not me. I seen 'em all, good and bad. Never did find any worth hookin' up with." He paused. "Not till now."

"Now? You mean Fanny?"

"Yes, ma'am. She's—she's different."

Ma exhibited no great enthusiasm, as she admitted, "Yep, she's different. So you made up your mind. You want to marry her?"

George squirmed almost imperceptibly. "I—I guess that's about it."

Ma scrutinized him. "When?"

"Oh—I don't know. Pretty soon."

"Right away?"

George laughed nervously. "Well—not this minute. Soon."

Ma paused before her next remark, which she delivered slowly. "Look here—ain't you likely to get sent overseas any time now?"

George started. "Why—what did you hear? Not that I know of. I'm fixed swell in the recruitin' office over in Manhattan."

"I seen in the paper the other day about how they're always shiftin' these offices. They was talk about even closin' 'em up. How do you know you mayn't be sent off somewheres else,—France, maybe?"

George studied her, then said, nonchalantly, "Oh, well—I ain't God. I don't know everything."

Ma fixed his eye as she asked, insinuatingly, "You're sure you want to marry her before you do go?"

She could detect no insincerity in his firm answer, "Sure!"

But she pursued, "Certain you love her enough? Sure it's not just another—well—just another to make love to and run off from?"

"She's the only girl I ever wanted to marry. I ain't the marryin' kind, that's true enough. But Fanny—it's different, that's all."

"Maybe so. Now then—how about her? What does she think? I'll admit it looks like she's crazy about you."

George was almost bashful, as he answered, "Well—I wouldn't say crazy, exactly. She's pretty fond of me, all right."

"Crazy—that's the word," Ma insisted, "as if I don't know! I've watched her all these years. Hated boys. It's the war, and these yankeedoodle notions about everybody in uniform bein' a hero. She don't know much about life, or people, either. She's got a whole head-full of silly, kid ideas about knights and steeds and such goin's on. Did she ever tell you?"

"Sure she did," George replied, warmly. "Some of 'em, anyways. I think they're cute. That's the kind of a kid she is."

"All right," countered the woman, "how do you know it ain't just some kind of a fancy she's got you mixed up with? Just a story-book fairy-tale? What makes you think it'll last?"

"I'll take a chance on that," George said, "she sure is straight out. She means it. She don't lie."

Ma smiled grimly. "No—not meanin' to. But then—all right. Suppose you get married now. Suppose you get sent over right away. And then you get hurt real bad, maybe killed."

"That's the chance we all got to take."

Ma nodded. "Yep. And if she should have a baby?"

"They's the government insurance, they's the allowance out of my pay. Ain't you goin' pretty fast, anyhow, ma'am?"

Ma eyed him humorously, then spoke. "Here's the last question. Let's say you get married, and you come back all safe and sound. Goin' to stay in the Marines? What'll Fanny do, with you off Lord knows where?"

"I got that all doped out, too," he said, in mild triumph. "Didn't I tell you I'm a good mechanic? Well, I already got a job promised, any time I want it—a swell job. Big garage over on Fulton around the corner from Clinton. How's that?"

Ma pursed her lips. "You certainly talk it off smooth."

George slapped his knee. "So—it's O. K.?"

"Wait a minute!" Ma put up her hand, "wait a minute. I got my duty to do. No more questions—but—hush a second." She sat staring in front of her, silently, to George's bewilderment. Then in another voice, monotonous, dreamy, she chanted, "Work—work—same old places, same old people, the kids yellin' around—that's a hell of a life for a man—"

George's hair crept. "Say—what—," he began.

Ma went right on, "Restless—well, why shouldn't I be? It's in my blood, damn it, can't you understand that? The wind, and the smell, and the niggers jabberin,' and the sun beatin' down right clean into the middle of you— Forget it? How can I?"

George, dumbfounded, cried, "I—you—say, what's the—"

Ma suddenly leaned toward him, pointing her finger, and in her normal voice, like the crack of a whip, pronounced, "I was married to you once, did you know that?"

George leaped to his feet in alarm, looking wildly about him. "Me? Say—"

Ma let her finger fall. But in deadly earnest, she continued, "Oh—maybe not you. Somebody as like you as two peas. My husband—he was a sailor."

George burst into a great laugh of relief and understanding.

Ma cut him short. "It's nothin' to laugh at. He—" with great emphasis, "he settled down. Yes. Carpenterin'. I understand a heap better now,—after all these years. I wasn't happy, no. He wasn't, either. He couldn't help it. Somethin' kept callin' to him. Somethin' I couldn't hear. Think that over."

George started to speak, thought better of it, sat down abruptly, and stroked his chin. He stared at the worn face.

"You give up a lot when you get married," she said, softly, after a silence, "both people does. You got to be willin' to keep givin' up."

George, obviously troubled, studied the tip of his right shoe.

Ma sighed. Then, in a lighter voice, she said, "Maybe its all right for you two. I just want to be sure. I don't want her to make a mistake like me. I'm not tellin' you you can't—that would be silly. But it seems to me it would be lots wiser to wait till the war's over, if it ever is. But that's up to you. All I say is—think it over, take your time. They's no rush."

George cleared his throat, unhappily. "But s'pose— I mean, if some fool order come through—"

Ma flashed him a glance, then rose, and walked toward the window. "Think it over," she repeated, "you're welcome here all you like. You can call yourselves engaged if

you want to. I can trust you not to do anything wrong, I know I can."

George flushed. "Why, of course."

Ma came over to him, and took his hand. "I know it. Now, don't hold it against me, what I been warnin' you. I had to do it for her sake. I—"

A noise of voices on the stairs galvanized her into a quick whisper, "You can tell Fanny about our talkin', or not, just as you think's the best. I leave it to you. All I say is—think it over!"

She dropped his hand, and went quickly to the door, which she opened. A girl of seventeen, vapidly pretty, enentered, giggling, with Fred.

She was introduced to George as Zelda. She gaped, and rolled her eyes continually at him, much to Fred's ill-concealed annoyance and jealousy.

Then a key was heard in the lock, and Fanny came in. She stopped short, seeing George.

"Oh!" she cried, "you're here already?"

"Why, sure," George said, slightly haltingly, going toward her, "you're late."

"But—why, you weren't coming till after supper!" Fanny was puzzled, and alarmed.

"I ast him to come," Ma announced blandly, "I wanted to talk to him. We had a very nice talk. I made him tell me your little secret."

Fanny gasped. "My—our—"

"Yes," continued Ma, in even tones, "he tells me you're engaged."

Fanny swayed on her feet, caught at George, who put one arm about her, and said, tenderly, "It's all right, baby."

Zelda danced with excitement, emitting squeals. Fred, be-

hind George's back, stared at Ma, with incredulous astonishment.

Ma frowned sternly at him, walked calmly to Fanny, and said, "I think it's fine. George is a mighty nice boy." She patted her daughter upon the shoulder.

Fred, with a lame attempt at bewildered cordiality, shook George's hand. "Well, well—well well," he said.

Zelda, rushing about kept making noises, "Oh, I'm so excited! Oh, ain't it exciting!" She flung herself on Fanny. "When's it goin' to be?"

Fanny looked up helplessly at George. "Why I—why we—"

"One thing at a time," George attempted raillery, "give us a chance. We didn't decide that yet, did we, Fan?"

Fanny kept searching her mother with wondering eyes. "No," she said.

George said to Fanny, "Why, what's the matter, baby? Ain't ashamed of bein' engaged to me, are you?"

"No! No!" Fanny repeated, clinging to him, "Only—it's all so—so quick—"

Zelda continued her caperings. "You goin' to have a great big wedding, or just a few?"

Here Ma interfered. "Don't pester 'em, Zelda. Don't you see they want you to leave 'em alone? I'm goin' out to the kitchen and get supper. I could use some help. You're goin' to stay, of course, George?"

George looked hurriedly at his watch. "Holy Smoke! I got to be back to the office by six!"

"Can't you call 'em up?" Ma urged, "Special occasion, like this—"

"I could try—" George began, starting toward the 'phone. But Fanny, with a quick movement, held him back.

Ma saw the movement. Lightly, she said, "Well, suit yourself. Hope you decide to stay." She walked out, unhurriedly.

George said in a low voice, "What's the trouble, honey?"

Fanny turned on Fred and Zelda, who were whispering in a corner. "Listen, Fred. You two go on out. I want to talk to George."

"Aw, we ain't botherin' you," Fred growled.

"Oh, now Fred!" protested Zelda, "How'd you like it if you wanted to be alone with your girl? Come on!" She dragged at his hand. He made a grab at her, and followed her to the kitchen.

The moment they were left alone, Fanny threw her arms around George, and cried, "Oh, George!"

"That's my baby!" he soothed, and kissed her long upon the lips.

Fanny lifted her head. "But George—I don't understand —how could you talk about it to Ma?"

"That's all right, baby," he answered. "You see—she sent for me, and started right in on me—wanted to know straight out what was the idea, so I says we wanted to get married. I ain't ashamed of it."

"But George—don't you see— I don't talk about things to Ma!"

"What's the harm, baby? She was grand. Just ast me a couple of questions—what was I goin' to do when I'm out of the service, and that kind of stuff, and that's all."

Fanny clutched her forehead. "You don't know Ma like I do. There's more to it than just that. She called you George, too."

"Well, now—" he said. "Why don't you talk to her?"

"I can't! I never can!" she protested, fiercely. "She thinks I haven't got any sense. She don't understand me!"

"She was just great to me."

There was desperation in Fanny's voice. "What's she butting in for? It's just you and me—that's all that matters!"

"Now, look here, baby," he stroked her hair, "calm down. You're just upsettin' yourself about nothin'."

She buried her face in his shoulder, crying, fiercely, "I love you! I love you!"

"There, there, kid, everything's fine! I love you, and you love me, and it's all Jake." He kissed the top of her head.

Just then, Zelda dashed in, shouting, "Say, Fanny, your Ma wants to know— Oh, excuse me!" She tittered in embarrassment.

Fanny did not stir from her lover's arms. She looked up coldly. "Well? What?"

"Where's that yella apron?"

"In the second drawer."

"Oh—all right—excuse me—" Zelda dashed out again.

Urgently Fanny said, "I can't talk to you here, with these —these people. I have to be alone with you. Don't stay. Meet me afterwards."

"But listen," George commenced.

"I can't explain—I can't think here. Go quick," she implored, "get back soon. I've got to be at the Service Club on the Heights. You meet me at nine—end of Montague Street, you know the place."

George teased her. "Say, ain't you the bossy one?"

"Go on, now!" she gave him a tender push. "So you can be sure and get back by nine!" She handed him his cap and overcoat. "Hurry!" She threw her arms about him again, clung to him, "Oh, dearest, dearest!"

George disengaged himself reluctantly, gayly put on his cap at an angle, waved his hand and departed.

Fanny watched after him, fondly. Then she turned toward the door toward the kitchen. She stood stiffly, staring at the door. Then she deliberately worked her face into a non-committal expression.

As she went toward the kitchen, she said, in the most offhand of voices, "Don't bother about fixing eggs for George. He had to get back to his office."

9

They stood leaning against the grilling overlooking the river. His arm was about her, her head upon his shoulder.

"You made me wait ten whole minutes!" she said, sweetly reproachful.

"I'm sorry as the devil, Fan. A whole lot of things come up, and I just missed the express, so I took a local, and—"

"Never mind," she interrupted, caressing his lips and stopping them with her fingers, "I don't care, now you're here."

"You know I wouldn't of kept you waitin'," he began again, after a moment.

"Hush, let's don't talk. Look out there. The fog's so thick! You can't see a thing, can you? It's like a room all around us. Now we're alone, all, all alone, just us two. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Sure is," he answered, vaguely.

"What's the matter, dearest?" she asked, quickly.

"Nothin'. Nothin' at all. I'm just tired."

"Well—let's sit down. Oh, darling, of course you're tired."

"Been up since six," he continued, wearily.

"Here!" she commanded, pulling him to a bench. "Now, put your head on my shoulder. There. Now, shut your eyes."

She smoothed his forehead with her free hand. In her heart was a quiet ecstasy.

From behind the fathomless curtain of fog came muffled toots, distant melodious screeches.

"Hear those?" she crooned, "that's the world, it's trying to get at us. We're safe, it can't find us."

He breathed rhythmically. "Why, I believe he's going to sleep!" she thought, smiling.

But the arc-light above them sputtered savagely, and he jumped, opening his eyes, wide.

"It's nothing but the light," she reassured him, "I guess it's mad because it can't half get through the fog. 'Gee, whiz!' that's what it says, 'Here I do the best I can, but this darn fog interferes with my business!' There, hear it?"

He settled back, with a short laugh.

Again the peace and stillness. Finally she spoke once more. "You aren't cold, are you?"

"Nope," he replied, "how about you?"

"I'm fine. Now, you all calmed down, and feel all right?"

"Sure."

"All right, then, dearest. Now, don't get excited, but I want you to tell me all about it."

"What?"

"You and Ma."

"Aw, say," he answered, wearily, "I told you all that once."

"Well, tell me again," she insisted, smoothly, "because I have to know."

He roused himself slightly. "Oh, well, then—she wanted to know where I come from, and if I was married, and things like that, and then she come to what about you and me, and I didn't see no sense beatin' around the bush, so I says sure, I wanted to marry you."

"All right. What else?"

"Oh, then she wanted to know about after I get out of the service what will I do, and I told her, and she says was I sure I wanted to get married, and was I sure you did, and I says yes, and that's about all."

Fanny waited for a moment, thinking deeply. "That don't sound like Ma," she said, presently, "there must be something else."

He yawned. "Oh, sure, she was anxious, of course. Said she wanted to be sure I was serious, because she knowed all about the wanderin' kind, like me."

Fanny stiffened, and her voice was sharp. "Is that what she said?"

"Yeh, but I told her once this war is over, I'm through. I seen enough. I guess I made her understand, all right."

"But dearest—why did you have to?" Vexation was mingled with desire not to scold, "Don't you see? I'm old enough—I'm my own boss—it's none of her business who I want to marry!"

"Oh, now—don't get excited," he soothed her, "ain't it natural she might get worried about you gettin' tangled up with somebody that reminded her of your Pa?"

Fanny sat up straight, clenched her hands. "Pa? did she say that?"

"Why, sure. What's the matter with that? Ain't you said the same thing, lots of times?"

"That's it! That's it! I knew it!" She beat her hands together.

George captured them. "Quit it, baby—quit it!"

"Don't you see?" she wailed, fiercely, "She hated Pa! She's against you!"

"You're crazy," he insisted, "she was blamin' herself about him. Said it was all her fault, and she wished she'd understood him then, like she does now."

"Oh, yes—I know! That's just talk! You *are* like Pa—wonderful, and strong, and going on adventures—and I loved him. But she didn't! She hated him! Oh, what's she going to try to do?"

"Now, look here. Wasn't she all right about us bein' engaged? Talk sense."

She turned to him, and desperately she said, "George! I'm scared! Look at me, George! Do you love me? Do you, do you?"

"Why, baby! That's a great question, that is!"

"Then—let's get married to-morrow!"

He stared at her. "Huh?"

"To-morrow! To-morrow!"

"Why—to-morrow's Sunday," he said, "we couldn't get a license."

"Monday, then. Monday, noon!"

George protested. "But I thought you was the one that wanted to wait—"

"I did, but I don't, now. Not after everything's spoiled!"

"Spoiled? Say, that's a good one!"

"Oh, George—don't you see—while it was our secret—

but now—I couldn't stand it to have anything happen! I couldn't. I couldn't! Listen—listen to me, now. You know how much I love you. Do you know what I'd do?"

"But everything's all right, baby—"

"Listen George! If you knew you were married already—"

"You're cuckoo! I told you the truth—don't you believe me?"

"But if you were—if anything in the world could keep us from getting married—I'd want you anyway!"

"But sweetheart—don't say things like that!"

"No—I have to say it. You know it already, but I have to say the words. I'd go with you somewhere—even to a hotel—now—this minute! That's how much—oh—" She choked upon sobs, hid her face down in his shoulder.

George stroked her head, murmuring, "Aw—Fan—there, don't take on that way, baby. You just got yourself all worked up without any reason."

His embarrassment at the forthrightness of her speech was augmented by his knowledge of its overwhelming sincerity. He began to feel a vague fright, too, at the burden of responsibility put upon him by so devastating a love.

"Gosh, baby—you make me feel awful peculiar," he said, "I ain't—I mean, nobody ain't worth—oh, gee, kid—I don't know what to say. Don't be worryin'. Nothin's goin' to happen. We'll get married just as soon as we can."

"Monday!" she insisted, lifting a tear-stained face.

"Well, now, listen, baby. I want to do this thing up right. Here I am, busy all the time. You got your job. We ain't got any place to stay. Hotels—they're terrible. I wanted to fix it so's we could get away for a little while."

"Get away?"

"Why, sure! Have a little honeymoon—maybe two weeks

—a week, anyways. They's some nice little dumps down to Atlantic City that ain't expensive. Get the idea?"

She brightened. "Atlantic City?"

"Sure, baby. Don't you see? If you sprung a vacation on 'em now, it might get you in a jam. But if you give 'em a couple of week's notice, why they'll let you off, see? Same with me. That's what made me late, if you got to know. I was talkin' to Cap Masters, feelin' him out about a ten-day furlough."

"You were!" She flung her arms around his neck. "But—we couldn't afford it!"

"Now listen—didn't I tell you I got nine hundred smackers tucked away? And it wouldn't cost us a cent more'n a hundred and fifty. Hell, we're only young once. We could spare it, easy."

"Could we?" she began, doubtfully. Then, "Yes—yes! I have something saved, too, you know. Two hundred and ten dollars. You didn't count on that, did you. Oh, George—darling—darling!"

"So there you are. Now, ain't you ashamed of gettin' all het up?"

"No!" she replied, immediately, "I'm still scared. Oh, couldn't we make it right after New Year's? That's over two weeks."

"All right," he said, after a pause, "call it some time the week after New Year's. Only mind—don't say anything down at the office till I give you the word. You might have some sort of trouble about it, and it's no use stirrin' up things till we get a date settled."

"Right after New Years! And we won't tell a soul! I'll pretend I'm all run down and have to have a rest. Mr. Magnus likes me. I'm sure I can fix it!"

"That's the ticket! And I'll keep workin' on the Cap. It's a cinch."

"Oh, George!" she breathed. Then, gathering impetus, she chattered of happy plans, surmises, "—and by that time, the flat'll be free . . . and I saw the cutest chairs, very cheap—"

George cast his eyes upward in the darkness, and congratulated himself upon his inspiration. Now he would have a little time to think things over. . . .

10

Christmas eve, George was superintending the closing of the office for over the Holiday. The corporal bustled about, piling up books.

"Yep, it won't be long now," the corporal repeated, "and believe me, I won't be sorry. I got into this here outfit to fight. I ain't any damn pen-pusher."

"You'll be a great help," George said, mechanically, his face solemn, "you got that pretty straight, did you?"

"Private letter to the Cap from a pal down in Washin'ton. It was layin' wide open, I couldn't help lookin' at it."

"Just another damn latrine rumor," George said.

"All right, fella—have it your own way. Only me—I'm studyin' up in my little red book. 'Bon jewer, maddymoiselle. Vooly-voo coochie aveck moy?' How's zat?"

"Great!" George replied, "Well, don't go buyin' any French ice cream yet awhile. And straighten out them papers of the Cap's before you beat it."

George swung out into the slush. For an hour he paced about Times Square, oblivious of the rushing crowds, his eyes lowered. He had no desire for food. He turned on Forty-second Street, heading for a jeweler's shop on Sixth Avenue. As he passed a phonograph store, he was arrested by strains from within.

"Sweetheart—sweetheart—sweetheart—"

He entered the shop, heard the record through, and made his decision.

Half an hour later, he left, with two huge packages.

He telephoned Fanny from a United Cigar Store.

"It's a dirty shame—Christmas eve, and all—but the junk they sprung on us—yeh, so's we don't have to be here tomorrow. I'm dead all in. But I'll be with you—sure, sure. Wouldn't miss Christmas dinner with my sweetheart, not for General Pershing hisself. And listen, baby—I got a surprise for you.—Never mind—you'll find out— Love me, baby?—"

He carried his bundles to his dismal room on Forty-eighth Street, near Tenth Avenue. He paced the floor, up, down, round and round. The pile of cigarette butts grew.

At last, with a curse, he crumpled the empty packet. He discovered that, also, he was hungry.

It was in the cafeteria that he made his decision.

"It's tough!" he muttered under his breath, "but—"

He made his way back to his room, and went soundly to sleep.

II

At Christmas dinner, George was grateful that Fred was the center of attention. That young lout had received his notification to proceed to Yaphank on the twenty-eighth, and already was speaking of the army in the first person plural. Much to-do was made over him by Zelda and by another youth of the same caliber and general appearance as himself, also called into the Quartermaster. Fanny was unusually gay, even Ma ventured a smile at intervals.

George was therefore able to sit back quietly, contribute an occasional remark, and watch Fanny. Never had she seemed so beautiful, so out of place among these sordid surroundings. "She's a reg'lar flower," he thought, and a dull pain went through him, a heavy depression.

"Sure are great eats, ma'am," he said to Ma, lest his mood should be noticed.

"Thank Fanny," Ma suggested, "she done the turkey, all herself; and what's more, she made them biscuits."

"Best chow I ever tasted," he addressed Fanny warmly, "you're always surprisin' me some new way, kid."

Fanny adored him with her eyes.

"We don't get as good as this workin' for Uncle Sam, do we, Sarge?" Fred put in.

George winced at the "Sarge," which happened to be the

epithet most abhorred. "Can't tell about the Q. M.," he answered, "they got more time for rustlin' up peacock's ears and gold-plated watermelons and such."

This remark effectively checked any further attempt at comradeship on Fred's part. He swung the conversation immediately over discussion of Yaphank as a camp, what he had heard of it, how they treated you, and how swell it would be to come into New York often. George was once more allowed to sit in quiet and in contemplation of Fanny.

After dinner, all of the others went over to Zelda's, to see her "Christmas," abandoning Fanny and George, to their immense satisfaction.

"Just think," said Fanny, in his arms, "our first Christmas together!"

"Just Santy Claus's present to the both of us, huh?" he said.

"The first!" she repeated, "And only the beginning of a whole, whole string of them! 'Way, 'way out until we're old and gray and can't do anything but sit around."

He shifted nervously. "You—you tell 'em, Grandma!" he said, and laughed loudly. "Now listen, kid. You shouldn't oughta of spended all that dough on my wrist-watch."

She pulled the watch upward, and kissed it and the wrist with quick kisses. "If it was all diamonds and rubies, it wouldn't be too good for you!" she cried.

"Cut that out!" he said, "You want my head to swell up so big it'll float out the window? Naw, baby, a old Ingersoll would of been good enough for me, and—"

She interrupted the speech with a kiss.

Presently, he spoke again.

"And I guess all of you thought I was a big short-skate, not givin' you no present yet, hey?"

"Old pinch-penny!" she mocked, tenderly.

"Well,—of course, I did think I had to get you somethin'. So—come down-stairs with me a sec. You can give me a lift on it."

"O-o-oh! I knew it!" she laughed, bounding from his lap and rushing to the door, "Where? Where?"

"Take your time," he said, following her, "it's down there, under the stairs."

He found her already dragging at a large object, paper-wrapped. "Leave it be. I'll handle it. All you got to do is steady it, so it don't fall down and kill my dogs." He pulled it out, and staggered up the two flights with it.

"What is it? What is it?" she kept asking, excitedly.

"Listen!" he protested. "Less noise and more help. I damn near dropped it that time." He was depositing it in the living-room. "What does a girl usually get for bein' engaged?"

"A ring!" she answered.

"Well—that's what it is—a ring, see?"

"Oh, you crazy!" she exclaimed, delightedly, and tore off great pieces of the wrappings. "Why—it's a—it's a Victrola!"

She stood, a bit bewildered, while he hurriedly explained.

"Sure, baby. Don't you like it?"

"But I—but it must of cost—oh, now who ought to be jumped on for spending money? George—you shouldn't—"

"Aw, go on. I figgered it all out, see? Everybody gets rings. But me and my baby is different." He stripped the remaining covers from it, and it shone forth, bright and beautiful. "What can you do with a ring? But a Vic, now—it's somethin' you can always use."

"Oh, George!" she cried. "If you aren't the cutest! Oh, it's such a beauty!" She threw herself upon him.

"Do you really like it, baby? You see—I got you a whole flock of records, too. Jazz, and swell Red Seal ones, like this here 'Home Sweet Home,' and look." He reached over, pulled out one from the package, and started the machinery.

The introduction to the "Sweetheart" song from "Maytime" floated out.

"Our song!" she whispered.

"Yeh. They didn't have no lady singin' it, like in the show. But I says to myself, 'Well, a man's a lot better, anyways, because then she can pretend it's me.' See? I don't mean I could sing good like that, but you know what I mean—"

"Sssh!" she said, softly. "I know. Don't let's miss any of it."

They played it through, twice. Then they played, "Over There," and "America, I Love You," and several of Sousa's Marches, and Alma Gluck's rendering of "Home, Sweet Home."

Her eyes moist, and her voice quavering, Fanny said, "My darling! I just love it. Oh, who'd ever want a nasty old ring, anyhow?"

"Sure," he agreed. "I was sort of scared maybe you'd want a ring, after all. But then, I knowed you got sense, baby."

"And I'll get a ring, too—right away. The kind that means lots more than any engagement ring, won't I? Just a little plain one, but—oh, George!"

"You betcha," he said. "But the Vic was a swell hunch, wasn't it? You know, they's only one thing. If I could only make some kind of record for you. I mean. I can't sing, but just a talkin' one, kind of—know what I mean? Tellin' you what a swell girl you are, see? So's I could be right with you, all the time—"

"Silly!" she interrupted. "What do I need with that? I can have your real voice, can't I?"

"Why, sure!" he agreed, quickly. "But—you know—if I had to go away, maybe—"

"Go away!" There was the familiar alarm in her tones.

Now was the time.

But he couldn't.

"Oh, well—I just mean, suppose I was shifted to Chi. or some place like that. You could play it, and pretend I was holdin' your hand—"

"Chicago? Why, wouldn't you take me with you?"

He gave up. "Sure I would, baby. I was just kiddin'. But it's a cute idea, anyway. I mean, now, before we get hitched. Look. To-night, f'r instance. Just when you're goin' to bed, and I'm over in Manhattan, you can creep out here, and start her up—keep the doors shut, see? That'll make it real soft. And then you play the 'Sweetheart' thing, and make out like it was me, singin' you to sleep."

"You funny old thing!" she cried. "You darling, darling!"

When Ma and the family returned, they found Fanny curled shamelessly up in George's lap in an arm-chair, directly before the very mouth of the machine, while Alma Gluck's voice sang through the dimness the old appreciation of "Home—home!" . . .

12

Three days later, in the Williams' general-room, George, not in his dress uniform, but in that of regular service,

paced up and down excitedly in front of the Victrola, which was grinding out, cheerfully, the quartet record of "America, I Love You."

For some moments he paced, pulling at his chin, and muttering. Then, he rushed to the telephone, flung down the receiver, and barked, "Bryant 7730. Yes. Bryant. Bryant!"

He paused, drumming with his fingertips. Rage mounted, as seconds passed. He shouted, "Say, listen! They got a switchboard with about ten trunks—how can it be busy? What? Yeh, I wisht I could get hold of your neck. You're some wise little broad, ain't you?" and slammed the receiver back into place.

Zelda entered from the back-room, carrying a large box. She wore her hat and coat. Immediately she said, "Still can't you get her?"

"Line's busy! Line's busy!' he raged, "God, I'd sure like to meet a couple of these here operators some dark night!"

Zelda nodded, excitedly and sympathetically. "I wisht they was somethin' I could do. Wouldn't you just know—the very day she ought to be the easiest to find, she has to be out of the office!"

"It's hell, that's all."

Zelda blinked, solemnly. "I think it's the saddest thing that ever happened. Here you was, so happy and everything Christmas, and now you can't get married, or anything! Oh, it's just awful! If you only could of knew!"

George gave her a quick, sly look. He decided the remark was entirely guileless.

"Yeh," he groaned, "if I only could of! But there you are —that's the Marines all over. Yank you one place—yank you another—no more home than a dog. And now, without no

warnin' at all—not a half a day—overseas—bing—gosh. If I—"

The loud ringing of the 'phone cut the speech short. He answered. "Hello. Yeh? Who? Oh. Mack—what? Yeh, it's me. What? Oh, for God's sake, tell him I just got to wait till I can see my girl. Aw, you know—tell him—tell him anything you can think up. Use your bean. I can't go off without even sayin' good-by, you damn fool! What? Well, try it—try it. Can't you? What? I can't—say, are you crazy? Five-thirty? Jesus—it's ten to five already! Oh, well—try it. Yeh. I'll be right here!"

He hung up. Zelda chirped with pity. "Oh, my goodness—do they want you to go right now?"

George tore about the room, shutting off the Victrola with a jerk. "What do they think I am? Be over there by five-thirty, hell! They think I got wings?"

Zelda went to the door. "I'll be right back. I only got to run this dress around the corner." She left.

George hurried to the 'phone once more. "Bryant 7730. And for Pete's sake, put some snap into it—what? All right, lady, all right. . . . Hello, J. G. Magnus and Company? Well, I want to talk to Miss Williams, Miss Fanny Williams. . . . Hello—Fanny, sweetheart? . . . Oh, excuse me. Well, where is she? What? She is? . . . Wait, say that again. Well listen, this is terrible important. If she calls up before you shut down over there, tell her—" he groaned, "well, it ain't any use. Tell her—listen, now—tell her George says good-by, and he loves her. She'll understand. Thanks."

He hung up the receiver slowly. Relief was in his countenance, relief mingled with a genuine sadness.

"I guess I'm pretty much of a louse," he said, half-aloud.

Then he spoke again. "But I didn't do her no wrong, thank God."

He rose and walked speedily in the direction of his hat. But as he reached it, he changed his mind, and once more went to the telephone.

"Murray Hill 5271. No. 71—71—71!! Thanks, sister."

Through his teeth he whistled, absently, "Long Boy."

"Hello—hello—Mack? Well, what did he say? . . . But Gees, it's a hell of a dirty trick, goin' off without even sayin' good-by—lemme talk to him. Yeh. Hurry up. . . . Well, lemme talk, will you? . . . Hello, Captain Masters? Sergeant Cary, Sir. . . . Yes, sir, I know, but— . . . but honest, sir, it's terrible important to me. Can't I leave here and go direct to the ship? I got everything all ready, and Mack—just a minute, sir, will you hold the wire?"

He had heard a noise at the door. With perturbation and gladness struggling for supremacy in his mind, he dashed to open it.

"F-Fanny!" he said, swinging it wide.

It was Mrs. Williams, breathless from climbing the stairs.

"Oh, howdy," he said, briefly, and ran back to the 'phone.

"Hello, Captain Masters? Well, it's a funny fix, sir—it's my girl, the one I was talkin' to you about. I been tryin' all afternoon to get hold of her, so's I could just say good-by, and she didn't come home yet. All I want is five minutes, so's I can explain—but look, sir, Sergeant McCormick can do that. . . ."

He listened at length to a voice which yelped through the receiver. As the seconds passed, he stiffened into military obedience. Finally, he said, in a tone from which humanness had been removed. "Yes, sir. Of course, you're right, sir.

Yes, sir, I'll come, right away. This minute, sir. Good-by."

With a gesture of rage and annoyance, he said to Ma who had stood close to him, listening, "Well—you heard him. They ain't no two ways about it. I got to go."

Ma nodded, cryptically. "Yeh, I heard."

George shouted, as if to justify himself by sheer noise. "What can a guy do? Two hours' notice they go and close the whole office—no more recruitin'—got to be aboard by six-fifteen. Overseas detachment, on the—God, we ain't even allowed to tell the name of the ship!" His hands flopped to his sides.

Ma peered at him sagely. "Well, I can't say as I'm surprised, after what you says the other day. And you can't find hair nor hide of Fanny, huh?"

George, with over-emphasis, blustered. "Can you beat it? The second I found out for sure, I call her office. Nobody knows anything except she's out. Now I get word she ain't comin' back, and they needn't expect her home till after nine."

Ma continued peering at him with a grim smile. "So—you won't have to see her?"

George glared, but without conviction. "What do you mean—'have to'? How can I? She had to go with some damn Mr. Magnus, takin' down a speech—'Conversation of food' or somethin'. Nobody knows where the speech is goin' to be. And another one to-night."

Ma's smile faded. "Of course, it's goin' to be sort of hard for her to understand—goin' so sudden, and all—"

George blustered again. "I done everything in the world I know how to. You heard me arguin' with the boss. What did it get me? Five-thirty, I got to be at the office, or a court-martial. Gees, did he ride me—ast me did I think this war was a tea-party!"

"Oh, I'll back you up—you done everything you could," Ma said, a bit cynically. "You sure have tried to see her. Of course, you might of started, maybe, a little bit earlier, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothin', nothin'—" Ma was exaggeratedly calm, "I only meant—didn't you maybe have a little hint about leavin' —say, yesterday? I thought you was sort of nervous then."

Defiantly, George retorted. "No! The order came through to-day noon. Of course, I been hearin' a rumor or two, but hell, who believes these here rumors?"

Ma was mock-innocent. "You're right, of course you are. No use goin' off half-cocked, and upsettin' Fanny, when you'd had plenty of time—I mean, in case you really did want to get married, even this mornin', say—"

"What are you drivin' at?" George cut in, angrily.

"Nothin' in the world," Ma soothed, hypocritically. "It's just too bad things had to happen this way so quick—'specially if you still wanted to get married right away. I mean, if you hadn't changed your mind—"

George looked at her as though he would strike her, then the anger went out from him, and he spoke like a little boy caught in some juvenile misdemeanor, pleadingly, knowing that he will not be fully believed.

"I ain't changed my mind a bit. No ma'am. I admit I been doin' some tall thinkin'. But I want to marry her, you bet your sweet life I do. I'm crazy about her, and that's the truth. The minute I get back—well, you'll see! Only, what you says to me the other day—well, maybe it would be rushin' her off her feet, kind of—"

Ma allowed herself a mildly sarcastic emphasis. "Her? Oh, it was her you was thinkin' about not bein' rushed. I get you."

"Well, ain't that what you said yourself, Miz Williams? Ain't it? And I got to thinkin'—maybe you was right. Maybe it's a good thing to give her some time so's she could think it over. Maybe it's happenin' this way—it's lucky for her, see? Because maybe it ain't fair to her, me havin' been a bum, like you say. Don't tell her I say so, but—aw, you know what I mean."

Once more Ma smiled. "Yes, I guess I know, all right."

George floundered on. "Aw, now—don't get me wrong. I love her to death, I swear to God. But like you was sayin' —girls is funny things, and when they're young, like her, maybe they jump in where they oughtn't to of. And if she still likes me after she has a chance to use her head when I ain't around—"

Ma looked troubled. "Oh, I'll explain, all right. You can trust me. But whether she'll believe me or not—"

"Don't let her think I'm runnin' out on her—because I ain't! This here damn war can't go on forever, and the second I get through—"

Ma ignored his repetition. "Yeh, it's goin' to be terrible hard. But I'll fix it up. I'll make a reg'lar hero out of you. I'm glad, you know. I think it's lucky—for both of you. But I'm gladdest for her. She don't listen to me much. She don't like me. We can't get together. That don't keep me from lovin' her, all the same. And I got to do what's best for her. She—"

They both wheeled, as footsteps approached the door. But it was only Zelda, returning. Ma did not miss in George the shade of apprehension, which relief at finding it was not Fanny quickly erased, substituting his former mask of deep concern.

"Did you get her?" Zelda cried, before she was through the door.

George shook his head. His eye was still on Ma. He went to her, and now there was no more pretense.

"You win," he said, "for the time bein', anyways. You sure did knock my pins out the other day. Maybe you done right? I dunno. You made me feel like I wasn't good enough for her. Anyhow, we'll see. We both got time."

He held out his hand, shook hers gently.

"I—I wisht I could of saw her again, just this once more," he said, and his voice was husky. "Gee—she's one sweet kid. One sweet kid." He sighed.

Silently he went over to his hat and overcoat, which he donned. Zelda watched him wide-eyed, Ma with understanding and with pity. He hesitated, then came close to Ma.

"Make it easy on her, will you? I'll come back, and then we'll show you!"

Zelda began to sniffle.

Suddenly, George leaned over Ma, and kissed her resoundingly on the cheek.

"Transfer that to her, will you? And say—you ain't a half-bad old sketch, at that. Tell her—tell her I love her, will you? And—I guess that's all."

To Zelda, shaking her hand hastily, he said, "G'by."

He braced his shoulders, tipped his hat forward over one eye, and walked firmly out the door.

Zelda stared at him.

"But—what's the matter? What's the matter?" she wailed, "He don't look like he was a bit sorry!"

Ma looked in the direction he had gone, and her features were softened.

"He's a soldier," she said. "A soldier's job is soldierin'."

"But—poor Fanny! Not even sayin' good-by—"

Ma said, "Yeh, poor Fanny."

The 'phone rang. Zelda ran to it, crying, "There she is now! Maybe I can catch him."

Into the mouthpiece she said, "Hello—yes—oh . . . Sergeant Cary? Why, he just left. Just this minute. Yes. All right. Good-by."

"It was only some man," she told Ma.

"I guess it's just as well," Ma commented.

Zelda began whimpering, sentimentally, again. "Oh, poor Fanny! It's goin' to kill her, just about!"

Ma sighed. "Yeh, it's goin' to be quite a job."

"I'll do the best I can," said Zelda.

"Leave it to me," said Ma. "This has got to be handled right. Oh, Lord. I always got to handle things. Always me."

She stared at nothing, her lips framing sentences.

Part Three

1

Boulogne, France.
March 18, 1918.

Dearest Baby,

Well here I am in good old "la belle France," and I am going to join the First Division. Captain Masters has recommended me for top kiker to his friend Captain Lang and I am going to-morrow. They say Captain Lang is a wiz. Now baby, don't feel bad about me having to go without seeing you. It was just hell for me that is what I call it just hell. I love you. Wait till I get through with the Heines, we will show them all!!! There is a lot of talk about the Heines making a big advance but now that we are in it what can they do against we Americans? I tried to have a record made with me singing or talking but they do not have any way to make them. So use the Sweetheart one and think of me when you play it. So good-by baby. I will come back to you when this war is through like they say in the song about little Butercup. I love you. Will close now. Dont take any tin money.

George

2

"I'm glad you're going," she said to Ralph.

"So'm I," he said, "I knew you hated me all along for staying out."

"I didn't hate you," she contradicted, but he did not believe her, "I understood about your mother."

"Sure—maybe. But anyway, now she's dead—well, it's all right for me to go, now. Mrs. Walsh, she'll take good care of Sis. She'll maybe adopt her, if anything should happen to me."

"Can I do anything?"

"No, I don't guess so. Mrs. Walsh, she's fine. Sis is grand with her."

They sat in her beloved place, where she went often, now, her shrine, at the end of Montague Street, overlooking the river. The Easter air was fragrant, soft about them. She was thinking little of Ralph, of what he was saying.

"Things look pretty bad," he volunteered, after a silence. "Did you read about the long-distance gun?"

"No!" she said, sharply, at the tug in her heart.

"They're shooting churches in Paris, right in Paris. I guess they need all of us."

"Oh!" she murmured.

He cleared his throat. "I wish you loved me, just a little," he said."

"I'm engaged to George," she answered, gravely.

"I know it," he said, mournfully. "But that don't keep me from loving you, just the same."

"I'm sorry," she said, "and you promised you wouldn't talk about it ever again any more."

Another silence.

(Oh, God—the Germans winning, winning, every day fresh miserable reports, headlines, horror!

Easter! Christ is risen! Those Germans!)

"Well—I guess you don't want to talk to me any more. Good-by, Fanny dearest."

He stood above her, and held out his hand.

"Good-by," she said, and looked at him. He was a pitiful little boy, going away.

"Come here," she said, "Lean over."

She kissed him, upon the lips, smoothing his forehead with one hand. She was a woman kissing a troubled little boy, comforting him.

"I'm glad you love me," she said, "I'm sorry—I mean, about the other things."

He gulped, and turned, and ran.

She did not watch him go.

Somewhere, out of the curling mist over the river, a hollow boom resounded. Some routine noise on an unseen ship.

(That long-distance gun!

Darned French—poor little French—oh, those Huns, those dirty, stinking beasts! Can't anything stop them? Not anything?

Our boys—our Yanks!

George!

Our knights! . . .)

3

——FRANCE, May 7, 1918.

Dearest Baby,

Well this is some swell outfit and believe me we are rareing to go. I am not allowed to tell anything about it but when

the Heines get a look at us they will turn tale you said it. The photo is fine. Thats my sweetheart! I showed all the boys. They want to know how I rate such a peach. Do you miss me dear like I miss you? I am sure getting tired of this fighting game. Wait till we have our own home. I will come back to you when this war is through like the song about little Butercup. I love your letters honey. Will close now. I love you. Dont take any tin money.

GEORGE.

4

CAMP UPTON, May 14, 1918.

Dear Fanny,

Will you please do me a favor. I want my violin, the good one. Old man Barnes has it in the store. Will you please ask him to send it to me right away. Insure it for three hundred dollars. Enclose please find money order for postage and registering.

I have been playing the violin here and now they have me in the band. I wish I could play the clarinet better and I am practicing. But it looks as if I might even be the leader of the regiment band even if I can only play the violin because I am a good musician. The adjutant says maybe I will not leave here at all but they will keep me here the rest of the war in the band. The rest of them come and go but I stay here forever and I suppose you will hate me but it is not my

fault and I can help a lot more cheering up the poor fellows who come and go. In the casual companies. I would be a bum soldier anyhow I don't like to fight and the band is better.

I still love you whether you do or not.

RALPH.

P. S. If the charges for postage and etc. are more than the two dollars, please let me know and I will pay you. The reason I asked you to see about it is Barnes is an old crab and might not take good care to pack it right but if you watch him he will.

5

"Did she see you, Zelda?"

"No, ma'am. I folla'd her down there, and I sat over on some steps and watched her all the time, and she didn't notice. She didn't notice anything."

"Same place as last night?"

"Yes'm. Over there on a bench at the end of Montague. She just sat and sat, and kept lookin' at the river."

"She didn't—she didn't look desperit?"

"No'm. Just sat there. Dumb, sort of."

Ma walked around the room twice, thinking. "I s'pose they ain't anything we can say, and it ain't any use to worry. What time is it?"

"I guess it's about midnight. It was ha' past eleven by the time she left there, and she come right home."

"Look and see if she turned out her light yet."

Zelda tiptoed to the door of Fanny's room, returned immediately and reported, "It's out."

"Did you hear anything?"

"No, ma'am." A pause. "I wonder why she don't cry?"

"I guess it hurts too much for just little things like cryin'. Oh, well, she'll get used to it, after a while. I could just beat you for lettin' her get that letter from his friend."

Zelda commenced to whimper, "Aw, please don't bawl me out again. How'd I know?"

"I told you fifty times, if I told you once, lemme see the letters first. If I could of knew, I could of broke it to her easy."

"But it wasn't George's writin'—how did I know—"

"Never mind. It's too late, now. I hope you learnt your lesson. And that's another thing. I ain't goin' to say this again. You pay attention, hear me?"

Zelda concentrated. "Yes'm."

"That letter I got from George—I'm not goin' to tell you anything about it. You forget it, see? Forget it. You never heard of it. Understand?"

"Yes'm."

"I got my own plans. Maybe I won't never have to use it. But you don't know a thing about it, see?"

"Yes'm."

"And don't you dast say one word about it to Fred—'specially not to Fred, you hear?"

"Yes'm."

"All right. Thanks for watchin' Fanny. I guess you better go home now and get a good sleep. Fanny'll just have to work out of it, some way."

"Yes'm."

"Don't bother her none, and don't ast her any questions. I won't, neither. Lettin' her alone—that's best, now I'm pretty sure she ain't intendin' nothin' wild."

"Yes'm."

"And you don't need to be here till noon to-morrow. I won't have that cape finished till after two."

6

"Oh, Katie—it says, 'missing.' That doesn't have to mean he's dead. It doesn't have to, does it?"

"Sure not, honey. You know—they get lost, but they turn up."

"Sergeant McCormick, he says it was a machine-gun nest they sent George out after. But what if he didn't come back? He might be captured, couldn't he? It says he died gloriously —but how do they know? He didn't die! I know he didn't!"

"Sure not, honey. He'll turn up, all right."

Fanny looked Katie squarely in the eye, spoke very calmly. "I won't believe it. He isn't dead. He'll come back. I dreamed about it. He's just hurt a little. But he'll come back."

"Sure he will."

"Sure he will."

7

"It's better to try and forget him, Fanny."

"I won't."

Ma sighed. "But the War Department ought to know. Six months—after they're missin' that long—"

"I won't."

"All right, Fanny. I hope you're right."

8

"—Aw, who the hell wants to hurt her damn old Victrola?"

"Never mind arguin'. You keep your hands off that, understand?"

"Aw, but of all the cuckoo stuff—puttin' a flag over it, and that big goof's pitcher—"

"Shut your mouth! Fanny's got her rights, and you mind 'em."

"But Gees—it's so crazy—it gives me the willies! Mopin' around in front of that damn thing, and prayin' to it—"

"Are you goin' to shut up?"

"Oh—all right, all right. I won't play it any more. Only can't she for God's sake cheer up a little?"

"That's her business."

"Aw—nuts!"

9

"No—I don't want to, Katie. Dancing—it wouldn't seem right."

"But Fan—you got to have a little fun. Stickin' by yourself won't bring him back to bein' alive."

"I know. But I can be faithful—even if he is dead."

"Sure, kid. But gosh—"

"Some time later, maybe. Not now, though. Don't you understand?"

"Sure, honey. I guess I do. Well, g'night."

Part Four

I

A YEAR DRAGGED itself along, and 1920 began with blizzards, influenza and general discomfort.

The Williams flat was jammed. Fred had wangled a discharge immediately after the Armistice, and had returned to his job in the Gotham Chain Shirt Store No. 7. His Quartermaster experience had taught him how to make the most spectacular show of the least possible work. He had emerged Q.M. Sergeant. First Class. His arrogance was now so complete that he soon bullied and bluffed his way to the position of Assistant Floor Manager of the shop. He prospered. He had married Zelda, who wished to make a home of her own. But Fred saw no reason for spending the money. Zelda and Fred, Ma and Fanny, therefore, occupied the space which was hardly comfortable for three.

Many times Fanny considered leaving, and taking a room with Katie, who was always urging her to do so. At intervals, Fanny would even begin packing her effects. This would happen after some particularly violent altercation with Fred. He somehow could not accustom himself to the idea of her right to nurse her sorrow in her own fashion. He was perpetually infuriated at the spectacle of her quiet aloofness. What did it get her? Why couldn't she be nice to guys? That big Marine sap was dead and gone, wasn't he? So forget him. Find somebody else. This mopin' around the house—God, it got on his nerves somethin' fierce. Couldn't she be decent to some of his friends once in a while? Hell, people thought she was half-witted, honest they did. He

thought so, too. Why, say—she was gettin' to be an old maid—a reg'lar old maid! Etc., etc.

To his outbursts, Fanny opposed outwardly her blank, immutable calm, which never failed to reduce him to incoherent ravings. But within, she became continually more disgusted, more weary, and more stubborn. And, always, strangely enough, it was Ma who saved her. Ma, still inarticulate so far as demonstrativeness was concerned, nevertheless maintained rigid justice. She put Fred in his place, interposed between his carpings and Fanny's right to live her own life. Fanny was grateful. She could not bring herself to love Ma, but she respected her. Ma was getting old, too. Her eyes squinted. Fanny stayed on.

She could not love Ma, because vaguely she felt that the old woman had interfered, in some subtle way, with her marriage to George. On the surface, Ma's hands were clean. Certainly she had said nothing against their engagement. She had been always cordial to George. There was that one talk, of course, that Ma had with George the evening of the announcement. But George had explained that. So had Ma, upon the one occasion when Fanny had referred to it. "I only ast him did he really want to marry you, and could he support you. A mother has to find out things like that, don't she?" That was the gist of the explanation. It sounded fair and reasonable. Nevertheless . . .

Of course, Ma was playing a game, too. Fanny saw through it with a slight, sad amusement. The game concerned itself with Ralph. Ma liked Ralph. She approved of him. It was obvious that, if Fanny would marry him, Ma would give her blessing.

Fanny, herself, could not deny that, in the eyes of the

world, Ralph was "a good match." He had come back from Camp Upton, where, as he had predicted, he had been retained as a permanent member of the band, with a certain self-confidence, a certain "pep" which formerly he had lacked. In the presence of customers, of strangers, even of Katie, he exhibited an alacritous charm which was decidedly pleasing. He had been back at the Music Store for only six months, when his boss gave his an astonishing raise. Katie spoke of him to Fanny in approving terms.

"You know," said she. "The kid—why say, he's turnin' out to be a reg'lar fella! Comic, even. And he's a real go-getter down to the store, they tell me. Why don't you think him over some of these days, Fan? Give the lad a chance."

"Oh, Katie! Don't be silly." Such was invariably Fanny's reply. And to her the suggestion could be nothing but silly. For, however much a man of the world Ralph might appear in public, in her presence he often became limp, helpless with adoration, childish and pitiful.

Yet she allowed him to come around continually. Once she had satisfied her sense of justice by impressing upon him finally that his matrimonial ambitions were as hopeless as ever. Did he understand? She wanted to play square. She thought he was nice, it was wonderful to feel that a person loved you the way he said he did—and she believed it. The world was a pretty lonely place. If he wanted to be her friend—oh, she would love to have him to be her friend. But marry him—after George—

She could not go into detailed explanation of the barrier between them. Perhaps she herself was not fully aware of the strength possessed by that Phantom Rival—that confused image of a Marine upon a Milk-white Steed, a knight

whose character, whose bearing, whose features awakened echoes of another voice, recounting tales of King Arthur and the Round Table, chanting, "Go to sleep, now, Fantan!"

Dimly, whenever she thought of love, that dear ghost walked in her sub-conscious, and reality became flat, stale, ridiculous.

Poor Ralph was forced to accept friendship, then, and whatever sense he could make out of the phrase, "After George—." He realized that he was the antithesis of a George. But perhaps—in time—well, he could not help himself. He loved her. Maybe she would change. He would not give up. And he did not annoy her.

Instead, he exerted himself to please her. He kept off sentimental subjects. He resumed his Sunday visits, bringing his violin, wooing her shrewdly with music where words would have aroused rebuke. Fanny came to count on the music. It calmed her. She would lie upon the sofa for an hour or more, while he sat in the shadows and played. He was still far from professional in his technique, but it served. The notes ran over her mind like clear, cool water. She would stop thinking. She would become drowsy. Often, she would slip quietly to sleep. Then he would sit and stare at her, loving her, afraid to move, happy with a pitiful happiness.

Once, he surprised her by beginning the "Maytime" waltz. She stopped him, with a cry.

"But—you like it on the Victrola," he said, aggrieved, "You're always playing it!"

"Go away—go home!" she said, agonized, then jumped to her feet and ran to her own room, her head averted, and slammed the door. Not all his bewildered apologies could

bring her out. He left, and did not come back for a week. He never mentioned the incident. There were some lessons he learned quickly.

Katie had a new steady, a fattish youth from the shoe department of Macy's. Like most of her favorites, he was gifted with clownishness. He handled his corpulence with grace, and was an extraordinarily good dancer. The four went places, to "toss their feet." Fanny enjoyed him. He was funny, and scorned any amorousness. He was a master of so many intricate and amazing steps that she did not greatly mind feeling his moist flabbiness upon the dance-floor. His funniest stunt was an imitation of Ted Lewis, performed in Katie's flat. Armed with Ralph's clarinet, which he played horribly, he presented an elephantine caricature which was remarkably exact. These were the times when Fanny felt happiest. Ralph managed to catch the spirit very well for one who was naturally shy and serious, and even developed some amusing tricks with his violin, playing "Pop, Goes the Weasel" standing on his head.

Ma, meanwhile, was delighted with Ralph's influence. Many an hour she had lain awake, seeking some remedy for her daughter's habitual depression and "queerness." Those first months after Fanny had finally accepted George's death as a fact—what an ordeal for a mother who yearns to comfort, and restore, and yet who recognizes with clarity the unsurpassable wall which years of inarticulateness and opposition on both sides have reared! Added to that the consciousness of her own trickery. And yet—she knew she was right. She had to interfere. Marriage with that replica of her own husband—

Had she cheated Fanny? The brief weeks of love which she might have known—

No, it was better this way. Now, nothing irrevocable had happened. Time, she felt sure, would cure.

Yet time did not seem to cure. With perpetual anxiety she surveyed the pale, listless face, the dull, mechanical routine which had become Fanny's substitute for Life. There were times when she was sure the girl was veritably, as Fred viciously averred, "goin' nuts." Those mysterious hours sitting alone by the water's edge, motionless, expressionless. The occasions when she would return to the flat, and find Fanny sitting in a chair before the Victrola, grinding out that "Sweetheart" thing over and over.

She shared Fred's aversion to Fanny's shrine—the talking-machine in the corner, covered with the silk American Flag, surmounted by the cheap photograph of George in uniform. It gave her the "creeps." She, too, was immeasurably disturbed by the girl's refusal to "go round" with any new boys. She did not, however, resent or ridicule this "being true to his memory," as Fred did. She ached with helplessness, bided her time, and planned.

Just as she was upon the point of a radical step, a crashing blow of disillusionment which she would be able to deal by means of a weapon she guarded in secret, Ralph commenced to turn up with increasing frequency, and hope surged.

Here was a nice boy if there ever was one, none of your wild hell-raisers; but steady, reliable, sweet, good-looking. Doing well in his work, thrifty, he'd get somewhere. True, he was sort of kiddish, but he'd get over that. The finest kind of a husband for Fanny.

Indirectly—for she knew perfectly that any open recommendation would simply stir up antagonism—she waged propaganda. This most often took the form of stubborn

defense against Fred's sarcasms. Fred considered Ralph "sissy." Ma recommended his own cultivation of some of the sissy traits, then. There were many more points of combat. Ma won victory after victory: But always with the air of one superintending justice, intent upon a disinterested square deal for all.

Fanny, as we have said, saw through this game, and was faintly amused. She did not object. Poor old Ma—she wanted to do what she could. What difference did it make?

Ma even went so far as to throw in a few minor criticisms, to Fanny, of Ralph. And the days went by, and she rejoiced. The girl was certainly beginning to cheer up. She didn't stand and look at George's picture half as often as she used to. She laughed and chatted with Ralph. Oh, it was all going to work out fine!

Then, unexpectedly, Fanny began to exhibit the old signs. Even worse, now. Locking herself up in her room, and weeping. Disappearing by herself in the evenings. Zelda followed her twice, and spied upon her at the old spot on Montague Street, clinging to the grille-work, and staring, staring.

A week went by, and Fred continually complained of his sister's revived "goofishness." Ralph did not appear for what Fred called "that damn Sunday concert." Instead, Fanny, after moping about all the forenoon, without a word of explanation left the flat abruptly after noon dinner, and Ma saw her get into a taxicab at the corner. This was an unheard of extravagance, and only served to increase the old woman's worry.

Fanny returned early, wet with snow. She seemed less unhappy. But she said nothing.

Monday the tension continued. And on Tuesday morning, a loud quarrel took place. Fred was planning a celebration

for Wednesday evening. It was his marriage anniversary.

"Listen, Jollity!" he said to Fanny, "This is goin' to be some party! Now, it ain't for my benefit I'm askin', God knows. But my pal, Harry Kennedy, he thinks you're swell. Just a little crazy, he is. But that's what he thinks. Now, see if you can't be decent for once in your life, and give him a good time."

Fanny hesitated, then said, "I—I can't be here."

"What!" Fred shouted, "Where the Hell do you get off with that stuff?"

"I just can't, that's all."

"Got some other date, I s'pose. Well, you can bust it, see?"

"No—I haven't got any other date. But I'll just go to Katie's. It's only—well—you wouldn't understand if I tried to explain. What do you want me for, anyway? I'd just be a wet blanket."

"I'll say you would!" Fred agreed, violently. "But I don't give a damn. Ma, for the love of God, are you goin' to let her get away with that? Leavin' us flat?"

"Let her alone!" Ma said, frowning and shaking her head with immense meaning, "I'll fix it."

Fred flung from the room. Fanny said, "Ma—you know I couldn't stand it." She followed Fred.

Ma sat thinking for many minutes, alone. She went to her sewing-machine, and opened a small drawer, which she kept always securely locked. From it, she drew forth an envelope. She sat, studying it, for many minutes. Finally, with a sigh, and a negative shake of the head, she thrust the envelope back into its hiding-place.

She arose, went to the phone, and called a number.

"Ralph?" she said, "It's Miz Williams, Fanny's Ma. Can

you get off a little bit early to-night? Come over here around ha'past four. Don't let Fanny catch on. It's important. Yes, it's very important. I want to have a talk with you. Good-by."

2

What was really happening to Fanny was, while somewhat complicated psychologically, quite simple in fact. Against her will, contrary to her ideals and her hopes, she was becoming fascinated with a man.

Exactly three weeks before, she had been summoned to Mr. Magnus' office. That plump and aging gentleman, rubbing his hands with a pleased, benevolent air, had begun speaking right away.

"I can guarantee Miss Williams for the quickest shorthander in New York," he said, addressing a shadow which sat teetering on a chair in a corner of the office, "You'll find her O. K."

He chuckled, then turned back to Fanny. "Miss Williams, take good care of this gentleman. He's my brother. Remember the Canadian colonel I used to tell you about? Well, take his letters, and fix up his commas, and make words come out right, just like you do for me. You're his secretary till he goes away, understand?"

Fanny was shyly inspecting the newcomer as she listened.

She saw a man in the middle forties, a little older than she had expected from the picture the boss had been forever

exhibiting to her during those war-days. A little older, because his black hair was shot through with patches of gray, and above his temples—her heart skipped a beat as she noticed this—it was snowy white. Trim and military he looked, even in the neat, rich business suit he wore. Not a dude—simply very well-dressed. He had a blue hard collar, the same color as his tie and his eyes, which, grave in their regard, held a provocative twinkle. There was something at the same time rakish and kind about him.

All these impressions registered during the few seconds it took him to rise, step forward easily, and say, "I'm sure Miss Williams and I will get along fine. Let's go into Mr. Engel's office—you said that's the one I'm to use, didn't you, Jimmy?"

Fanny felt warmed by his smile, and by his voice, which was startlingly deep and musical—of course, being a lawyer made it that way, she decided. Also, it had a slight Irishness in it—not a brogue, exactly, but a small Celtic twang which stirred memories of another voice, silenced these many years —her father's.

It was funny to hear old, fussy Mr. Magnus being called by the diminutive, "Jimmy." And yet, somehow it wasn't altogether incongruous, for his younger brother's ease, his poise, his sureness of handling himself counteracted the discrepancy between their ages, which must have been at least fifteen years, and made him seem, at that moment, infinitely more experienced, more worldly-wise—pleasantly so—than the excitable, jumpy little man.

"Oh, well, sure—big lawyer, and then, three years on the front—that would do it," she thought, as she followed him into the neighboring room.

From that first encounter, they worked together splendidly.

He was courteous, affable and natural in his attitude toward her. He had a great deal of work for her, and expected thoroughness and celerity in its execution. He apologized sometimes when he knew that the volume of letters and other matters would keep her going at maximum speed, but he did not omit any of it. Twice, when he knew that she had stayed overtime to finish up, so that important missives could be signed and go out the first thing in the morning, he offered to pay her extra. She refused, smilingly. The second time, she found on her desk a large box of candy. When she thanked him, he said, very matter-of-fact, "It's only right and proper. I wish you'd take money. If you won't—I have to ease my conscience somehow." The candy she shared with Katie. She did not take it home.

She found the material of his dictation a pleasant, indeed, an exciting change from the humdrum of wholesale groceries. Suits and settlements involving large sums of money were interesting. It was amusing to see how his keen mind clicked. She had somehow gathered the impression that he was rather wild, unconventional and even unsteady. Running off from his law-business for three years in the army. And now, stopping off in New York for three weeks, on his way to Cuba for another two months' vacation. And leaving his wife and two children up there in Toronto, too. But, to see how he took hold of a problem, worked it out so neatly, carving away the superfluous rubbish and leaving the issue clear, aroused her admiration, her awe. He obviously knew what he wanted, and how to get it. If he chose to run his life in a strange way, why on the other hand there was nothing sloppy about it. He was, she realized, brilliant. And therefore he did not need to follow regular rules.

She found his method of dictation immensely intriguing.

Each letter he would start slowly, a bit mumblingly, slightly in J. G.'s manner. Then, suddenly, he would begin to swing into it; and presently the sentences would come ringing forth, balanced, "just like in a book," she found herself thinking. There were times when he seemed to be making a speech. Even in dealing with the most prosaic subjects, he would apply that oratorical manner, which made her want to giggle, and yet charmed her by its novelty.

He kept his eyes fixed upon a spot apparently a foot or more above her head. When he was wound up, he would rise, frequently, from his chair, and walk up and down, gesturing with sweeps of his hands. That was when his voice sounded most like Pa's, and she found herself wincing.

He included every punctuation mark in his dictation. This she found amusing. It was peculiar enough in straight letters to his law firm, instructing "Charles Henrotin," one of his partners, to pay special attention to the Lewis estate: "Run over to Montreal once a week, semi-colon, the old lady appreciates it comma and it doesnt with an apostrophe do any harm to flatter her paragraph." But it seemed ridiculous to take such pains in the missive to one Earl Gowing, obviously one of his cronies, instructing him to be in Havana on the twenty-eighth.

"If you let that Mason house in V-e-d-a-d-o—that's the way it's spelled, they call it 'Vethatho,' silly language, Spanish, isn't it?" he looked at her, and his eyes twinkled. "Well —er—where was I? Oh, yes—I am going to murder you exclamation point. Nowhere one word else is it possible to see the Cuban sunset in all its gorgeous splendor—by the way, 'its' has no apostrophe, Miss Williams (she blushed, remembering such an error the day before)—when the rose comes sweeping up out of the sea comma and deepens until

the whole sky is one great blaze period. Well, well, rather poetic, what?"

"Is that part of the letter, the last, Mr. Magnus?" she said, seriously.

He smiled. "You didn't hear me say the punctuations, did you? I was only asking your opinion. You didn't think I could get poetic, did you—an old codger like me?"

"Oh, Mr. Magnus—old!" she said, before she realized the familiarity of the terms which her comment implied.

He bowed, gravely. "Thank you," he said. He looked at her directly. "That's very nice, coming from a young lady so charming." There was a brief silence, during which she looked down at her notebook. He started off again, detailed instructions to Mr. Gowing as to how much Mason should be offered, where to engage servants, where to find the secretary of the golf club.

When he had finished, and as she was turning to leave, he said, "Miss Williams. You've been working for me a week. I simply want to tell you how much I like your efficiency. I've never had any one take my dictation so perfectly, or make as few mistakes. That's all. Don't bother to stay late on these letters. It's all right if they don't go out before to-morrow noon."

She glowed from the compliment as she went to her desk. Katie noticed it, and said, "Well, kid! Somebody must of been ticklin' you under the chin, you look so pleased. Some girls have all the luck!" whereupon she sighed exaggeratedly, and Fanny said, "Crazy!" and laughed.

So their relations would undoubtedly have continued—willing employee and satisfied employer, nothing more—if it had not been for a highly important case, involving some huge public utility, which came to a crisis two days later. A

frantic exchange of telegrams, special delivery letters and long-distance calls resulted in his being faced with the necessity of returning at once to Toronto, and perhaps abandoning his Cuban trip.

She had carried on so much of the correspondence, planning that excursion, that she found herself actually sharing his disappointment. He was walking rapidly up and down the small office, pulling at his nose with vexation, thinking aloud. "Toronto—then over to Quebec—then Ottawa—Lord, if I once go back, I won't get away for weeks! They'll hook me properly!"

She hesitated, then spoke up. "But—couldn't you possibly straighten it out from here, Mr. Magnus?" she said.

"Possibly—possibly," he answered, still pulling his nose, "But it would mean working like the devil—all sorts of complicated letters—I don't see how—"

She said, "Well, sir—I haven't anything to do. I mean—I haven't any dates. So if you want me to—I mean, I'll be glad to stay two or three nights and work on it, if that would help. I just mean—I'm sort of used to the things, by now. And—"

He interrupted her, staring at her with gratitude.

"Could you? Would you? Good girl!" He stared at her again. "By George, you're a brick. All right, it's a go. This time, though, I'm going to make you take double pay for every minute after five o'clock. Understand? No joking!"

"But—," she commenced.

"But nothing!" he insisted, "Either you agree, or I'll have to ruin my vacation. You aren't going to do that. So it's all settled. Now—take a day letter—"

He pitched in. A fury of dictation. It was almost six when he said, mopping his forehead, "Well, that's as much as we

can handle to-day. I hate to inflict this on you—but mind you! Keep strict account of the exact time you leave—the exact minute. And thanks so much. If there's anything you can't make out, phone me at Jim's. I'll be there for dinner."

He dashed out. She worked until almost nine. Hungry and exhausted, but glad to have been of real use in a big deal, she snatched a bite at Childs', and went to bed immediately she reached the flat. This was the occasion of Ma's first recurrence of her worry. Fanny looked so tired, and she was so mysterious.

The next day, she found him already at the office, when she arrived—an event unheard-of in that easy-going establishment. He was opening wires, and was in the midst of placing a long-distance call.

They went to work immediately, and she found the day a repetition of the preceding afternoon. The office force had long since gone, the cleaning-man arrived, before Magnus sat down, puffing, leaned back, and announced, "Well—I guess that cleans it up. If they can't get it straight from this, they never will. Whew!" He looked at his watch. "Seven fifteen! I can't believe it."

He looked at her, with kindness and solicitude. "Why, you poor kid! You must be worn to a thread. Put up your book, now. How long will it take you to write the rest of that out?"

"I don't know—" she said wanly, despite her desire to belittle her fatigue, "Two hours, I guess."

"Two hours!" He frowned ferociously. "That settles it. We'll knock off this second. And you'll go have a good dinner with me."

Dinner with him! Oh—but—of course, she had eaten with J. G. sometimes, on their speaking-tours. But that was different. He was an old thing, a nice old thing, the most harm-

less in the world. This Mr. Emmet Magnus, though—with his twinkly eyes, and his jolly ways that were so pleasantly forceful, and his good looks, and his experience—why, it was a very different proposition, yes it was. Yet, how to refuse? It would seem silly of her just to say she couldn't. And she was hungry and tired, and a real good meal—

He had put on his overcoat. "Come on, up!" he said, "We'll have a quick bite, and then you can take the rest, afterwards. Out with you, now." There was authority in his voice. What was the use of arguing?

Meekly she rose, and quickly made herself ready. They passed into the steady downfall of snow, which was already spreading a white mantle upon the sidewalks. He hailed a taxi. In a few moments they were seated at a pink-lit table in Fraunce's Tavern.

She was abashed and quiet. He ordered for her—oysters, filet of sole, which he explained was one of the famous specialties of the place, and a marvelous salad. He talked gayly, emphasizing his gratitude to her for insuring his trip to Cuba. Within two weeks, he said, he would be basking upon the sunny beach, golfing, and trying his luck at the races, the Casino, and the jai-alai courts, instead of wading through slush and snow. He waxed lyric in his appreciation of warmth. It made her feel a trifle unhappy, remembering that she was doomed to this cold for months yet. She ventured a question about Canada—wasn't it cold there, and wasn't he used to it? He was, indeed. That's why he craved sunshine.

She had heard, somewhere, of jai-alai. Wasn't it like tennis? No, like hand-ball, only more so. As he talked, it all pictured itself for her—the courts, the flashing players, the hard rubber ball streaking white against the black walls,

the screaming and betting of the spectators, the rattle of Spanish, the shining blue-black hair of the men, the glowing brown-black eyes of the women. She listened, absorbed.

The dinner moved swiftly. It was only half-past eight when they arose, and made for the door.

"Too bad we haven't time to go upstairs a moment," he said, "They have wonderful relics of the Revolution there. I'm sure you'd like to look at them. I do, even if they do remind me of how you licked us." He laughed. He helped her into a taxi. "Some other time," he added.

She decided to pretend she hadn't heard him. True, the remark had been made in a cheerful, guileless tone. But—did she want there to be any "other time"? What did he mean, anyway?

Quickly she said, "My, you seem to know a lot about New York. I suppose you come down here a lot. But this is the first time you've been around the office."

He laughed. "I used to visit Jim quite often before the war. But I haven't had much chance since. A week last year. I don't enjoy mixing business with vacations—usually, anyhow. This time, I have to. It's not half bad, either." He smiled at her.

Fanny held her peace until they arrived again at the gloomy office-building. And he immediately became once more the employer. He routed out the janitor, and waved aside his suspicious glares with commands which brought instant obedience.

She sat at her desk, and commenced typing. He retired to a far corner, with a book which he took from his brother's desk. He seemed to pay no attention to her. But, after an hour, she glanced up and found him surveying her calmly and with a kindly interest, but steadily.

She shifted uneasily, and stopped writing. There was something disturbing, compelling about his gaze.

He sensed her discomfort, and spoke. "Sorry if I disturb you. I was just thinking, what a jolly way to get work done. Go right ahead. I know how annoying it is to feel that somebody is looking at you while you're trying to concentrate." He swung away from her, and continued his reading.

She succeeded in gathering speed again. But as her fingers flew, she thought about him. What a "jolly" way to work it was, as he had said. And what a nice man. Why weren't there more men like him? Kind, and good-looking, even if he was middle-aged. And snappy, and so interesting. So polite, too. Treated you like you were a lady. Talked so well, yet there wasn't anything sissy about it—she shivered slightly, remembering dimly the poetically-inclined lad in High School. No, he was a real man, and at the same time refined—a gentleman. Strange, she hadn't ever associated the two qualities. Mr. J. G. wasn't a gentleman, really. He was a nice old thing, but he wasn't refined. He gobbled his food, and made noises, clearing his throat rather disgustingly. But this was a gentleman—yet not a dude, or a Willy-boy, but a real, strong, he-man, who had been a colonel, and fought real battles against the Germans. Like George. But not like George. George, she had always thought, was the ideal for a knight. He was gentle, and a man through and through. But—well, he would have scorned Mr. Magnus' nicenesses. He didn't have to speak swell English. He would have thought it sissy, sort of. Or—would he? Wouldn't he, rather, have been the kind of soldier Mr. Magnus would have commanded, wouldn't he have respected him, fought for him gladly, followed him to glory and to death—

Her eyes were blinded with tears. She struggled to write

through them. She mustn't think of George, she mustn't. She must do as she always did when his image came between her and her tasks, to blind her, to take all the zest from living. She must make her mind a blank, an automatic translator of the symbols written in the notebook.

Habit and will prevailed. She shut out from her mind every idea but the pothooks and the keys. The pages piled up.

Finally, the last letter. She sighed, and leaned back.

Magnus wheeled his chair about, walked toward her. "Finished?" he said, cheerily, clapping the book together, and snapping open his watch. "Quick work, quick work! Just ten after ten. Let's have a look at them."

He stood by the desk, reading rapidly. She was dazed with fatigue. Smothering a yawn, she watched the light play on his profile. The silver patch above his temple glittered. How youthful he was, how alert, for all his forty-odd years. She felt his attraction steal over her. She had to look away, so poignantly she thought, in that moment, of Pa. . . . That last evening, before . . . before . . . bending down over the King Arthur book, with the lamplight glittering in his hair. . . .

Mr. Magnus made his signature quickly, seven times. He straightened. "Practically perfect!" he exclaimed, "Only two mistakes—I changed them, it's all right. My child, you're astonishing! Now, just nip in and fetch some special delivery stamps, and we're off."

When she returned with the stamps, he had already donned his overcoat, and was writing something, which he hastily shoved in his pocket. They succeeded, after much ringing, in summoning the elevator. At the street-door, before she could protest, he had seized the letters, and was leaping through the snow toward the mail-box. He waved at her,

shouted something about "taxi—be back in a second," and plunged around the corner, into the storm.

The porter of the building grinned sympathetically. "Ah—this workin' after hours—it's a tough life!" he said. He did not leer, as he might have done, the thought flashed through her mind. No, Mr. Magnus wasn't the kind of person anybody thought things like that about. He was respectable, and respected. She felt warmed toward the porter. She chatted with him about his habitual late hours, about the cleaning of the snow, about how sick and tired you got of winter.

"Ah, yes indeed," he said, wagging his head, "And who should know it better'n me, with the old woman just comin' out of the flu. But she'll be up and about to-morrow," he grinned, "and I won't have to be worryin' about the kids. Still, they're old enough to take care of theirself."

She was properly commiserating, and then the taxi drew up, and Mr. Magnus jumped out, and "Where shall I tell him?" he said, helping her in, at the same time pressing something into the porter's hand.

She gave her address, then added, instantly. "But you mustn't go out of your way, Mr. Magnus. I can get home all right. Just take me to the B. R. T."

"Out of my way?" he said, laughing, and shutting the door. "Well, that's a good one. It's right on my way. I'm a Brooklynite too, didn't you know that?"

He explained that his cousin had turned her house over to him for his stay. Mrs. Van Zant. She was in Palm Beach. There he was, in that enormous old place on Pierrepont Street—did she know it? Beyond Montague Terrace—right on that small Park.

He talked on, about how fond he was of Brooklyn—of the Heights, at least. All these vaudeville jokes about Brook-

lyn made him tired. It was a beautiful city—parts of it, such as Prospect Park and the Harbor, were certainly prettier than anything Manhattan had to offer, he said. And for convenience—why, Times Square was just as accessible, by subway or taxi, as from the Nineties. And very nice people, Brooklyn people, if you knew where to find them. Of course, he wouldn't want to live there all the time. You did get somewhat stuffy. Take J. G., for instance. He simply plumped himself down in that roost of his on Joralemon, year in, year out. No wonder he looked and acted like an old, old man. There was something about the Brooklyn style of house, he supposed, that made people settle down in them.

"They're so big, you get tired out, trying to find your way round them," he laughed. "My cousin's—it's like the Penn station. Gets sort of terrifying late at night, with no servants."

"Are you there absolutely all alone?" she asked.

"Well, I don't need much, you see. I eat all my meals out, except breakfast. In Manhattan, you know, or over at Jim's. And there are plenty of good restaurants here, too. The Clarendon, and the Bossert—that's right around the corner from me. Ever go to the Marine Roof in the summer? Great food, and cooling breezes. And then, there's the Crescent Club, if I'm lonely." He chuckled. "Only I'm never quite *that* lonely."

"But—but who makes your rooms up. I mean, you don't sweep the floors, do you?" she giggled at the idea.

"No. There's Bevis. Didn't I mention Bevis? His real name is Cuthbert, but you couldn't call a man that, could you? So we agreed that I should call him Bevis. He's been with me twelve years. Served under me in the war. Fine

soldier. And the best 'gentleman's gentleman' in the world. That's what they call them in England. Good friend, Bevis."

He continued a description of his servant. He talked more in praise of Brooklyn.

But Fanny, as she lay back and saw through the corner of the window the great piers of the bridge, found it impossible to contribute conversation. Pierrepont, near Montague Terrace—the little Park—why—from his window he could look out upon the magic city, across the water, her dream-city that was not New York, not anywhere but in her heart. The same view as from the foot of Montague, exactly. Did he share it with her? She wanted to ask, but felt herself tongue-tied. And then—she was not sure she wanted to know. She resented anyone sharing, until she was convinced he was worthy of it.

But there was something else, something far, far more precious. The statue—her Milk-white Steed, her's and Pa's. There it stood, opposite his very door. Did he notice it? Did it mean anything to him?

For a split-second she was impelled to question him. Then—no. It was too intimate. It was too sacred. But how she envied him, who had so easy access to those treasures.

She sat, and listened. He was nice. He was interesting. He had ideas. He put himself out to be pleasant.

The cab halted. "Here we are," he announced, getting out and assisting her. She glanced hastily upward, hoping that no one was spying. The clouds of snow reassured her.

"Good-night, and thanks no end," he said, shaking her hand, "You've certainly saved my life, and I shan't forget it. By the way—here's something I forgot." He thrust an

envelop into her glove. Then as she was upon the point of inquiring what it could be, he waved, slammed the door, and the cab whirled off.

Inside the vestibule, she opened the envelope. A note, "For your extra trouble." A check, for twenty-five dollars.

That new hat!

He was certainly kind and generous. She lay in bed, thinking about his courtesy, his generosity. Everything about his manner was so pleasant. Now, some men—she'd have been insulted at such a big gift. The work wasn't worth anything like it. But somehow, it was the way he did it. He made you feel you were doing him a favor to take it, instead of the other way around. And no obligations connected with it. He had the knack of getting along with people. Like Pa had it. Except with Ma. Oh, but that was different. Everybody else had been crazy about Pa. Ma, too at first, anyways.

Mr. Magnus was a peach. Did he ever look at the Milk-white Steed? Would he appreciate it? Maybe. Yes, it was possible. He certainly appreciated other beautiful things about Brooklyn. Look at the way he raved in the cab. He was certainly awful nice.

3

On the morrow, he was not at the office. A hurried trip to Philadelphia. Be back Friday.

How dull the ordinary run of work seemed. The old rigmarole about prunes, and peas, and pineapple, and dried beans. Shipments, and invoices, and discounts, and "Your valued order of the 20th inst. received, and will say—"

"Gawd, you look like a flock of sour milk!" Katie remarked at lunch the second day, "Cheer up, kid. It may be worse than it looks."

"This darn weather!" Fanny dissembled, hastily indicating the sleet, hurling its arrows against the pane.

"Yeh, it's turrible," Katie agreed. Then, as she gathered up her belongings, she whispered, "But *he'll* be back to-morra," and darted away.

Fanny was intensely troubled by the teasing remark. It crystallized the feelings she had been repressing, refusing to face. But now the damage was done.

There was truth in Katie's flip crack. The savor had departed from things. She kept looking around for his cheerful grin, she kept wishing for his quaint oratory, his punctilious punctuation, the soothing warmth of his voice, instead of the slap-dash, grating dictation of Mr. Forbes and the puttering mumble of old J. G.

And—and—a magnetism, a sort of electricity he had brought with him. Everything was so dead and unusual, now.

But—he'd be back to-morrow.

"I mustn't—I mustn't!" she thought. Why—she missed him, was definitely unhappy because he was not there! A married man, with two kids! What right had she to miss him? And George—it was disloyal to George! Even if everything was all right, which it wasn't. Of course, Mr. Magnus was old enough to be her father. But that made it all the worse!

Then a clarifying light came. What was she imagining?

It was just a little "crush" on her part. Think he really paid any attention to her? Why, he was just polite, courteous, like he'd be to anybody else. The elevator boy, even. He wasn't interested in her. What right did she have even thinking about him, except as a nice man for whom she worked, temporarily. He'd be off, away, and forget her immediately, and she'd forget him—

"But—it's my liking him—that way—at all—that's what scares me!" she could not fight it back.

In vain she employed her technique of making her mind a stenographic machine. It was successful until the day was finished, and she had started toward the subway.

Then a wave of impressions related to Mr. Magnus washed over her, and she was miserable.

She ate, alone, at a cafeteria after phoning Ma that she would not get home for dinner.

Afterwards, she spent an hour, pressed against the grillework at the end of Montague Street, oblivious of the icy wind which swept across the river.

It wasn't Mr. Magnus that made her feel miserable. It was the fact of her being able to feel that way about anybody.

"How can I—how can I?" the question kept revolving, recurring.

She could find no answer.

It was when she arrived home, before nine, it is true, but silent, compressed of lips, a bleakness in her eyes, that Ma felt the old alarm, the old fear, leap up.

"That George business again!" she muttered.

And just as it was beginning to look as if Ralph—

"Oh!" she breathed, watching Fanny's listless retreat into her own room, "Oh—it's started again!"

4

As for Colonel Magnus, he seemed to sense little of the disturbance he was causing. Now that his trip was assured, his bland pleasantness increased. He greeted her, upon his return from Philadelphia, with a hearty, "Well—glad to get back again. Must say I missed you."

There was little for him to do at the office. But he came regularly, and called for "my secretary."

Fanny could not help realizing that he enjoyed her presence in the room. She perceived that he gave her a number of unnecessary letters—at least, they seemed unimportant to her. Personal notes, with little significance. On the other hand, he even began to dictate his letters to his wife.

This became a daily duty. She was astonished at first that communications so intimate should be treated as part of business. But after several, she understood. They were pleasant, matter-of-fact discussions of plans, what to do about the children, perfunctory inquiries about his wife's health and her activities. Of these latter there seemed to be many. She was obviously a woman of energy and ability.

Concerning this, once he made a remark. "My wife has her finger in just about every pie in Canada," he said, more to himself than to Fanny. "Most capable woman I ever saw."

Then he grunted, and the grunt might have meant anything, but Fanny, looking up at him, decided it had in it a mixture of admiration and annoyance.

For, as the letters went on, the whole situation revealed itself. There was an "understanding" between the Colonel and his spouse. They "got along fine." As for romance—excitement—even love—well, the most fervent greeting he sent was "My dear wife." Most of the time it was "Dear Martha." Fanny wondered what she looked like. Probably somewhat severe, and thin, and busy. They had been married fourteen years, at least, because the eldest boy, he said one day, was thirteen. She expected him to haul out some photograph of his family. That was what married men, away from home, always did, according to the credo. He made no such gesture. Perhaps because he was not an American, but a Canadian.

Sometimes she wondered whether he might not have some ulterior motive in spreading before her his attitude toward "Martha." Her breath quickened as she recognized how fully he had shown her that he, a romantic sort of man, was certainly not in love with his wife.

But why should he want her to know this? What was his intention?

She thought she saw the approach of something specific when, a few days later, in the midst of a legal note, he announced, "I hope you haven't any engagement this evening, because I'm going to take you to dinner."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he continued, quickly. "If you have, all right. Have you?"

"No, but—" she started.

"That's settled then. I'll meet you at six-thirty, at Liggett's

Drug store. That's because I don't want you embarrassed by any of your friends seeing you. You know it's all quite harmless but maybe they might not."

"But—I don't think I ought—"

"That's enough," he smiled as he spoke, "Don't be stupid. I'm not going to bite you. See here. I'm lonely, and I want somebody to dine with. I'm sick of Jim's friends. You're supposed to be my secretary, aren't you? Well, then. I order you to appear there, at six-thirty. If you don't—why, you can simply go back to your regular duties to-morrow, and I'll use somebody else till I leave."

He walked quickly out the door.

All the rest of the afternoon she tossed the matter about in her mind. After all—but still—and then, her clothes, oughtn't she to change into something more suited to the evening—that is, if she went—but really, this was as cute a dress as she had, and everybody always said she looked her best in dark blue skirt and white waist, with Buster Brown collar and little black bow tie—but what did she care how she looked, she ought not to go—

She went. There surely wasn't any harm in just taking dinner with this nice, lonely man.

There apparently wasn't. He brought her to Fraunce's again, and before dinner he showed her the Revolutionary relics, and discoursed at great length upon them. While they were eating, he told her about his great-grandfather who had been, like him, a colonel—a colonel in Howe's army and had been taken prisoner toward the end of the Revolution. He had been released, and had settled in Canada.

He expatiated upon the virtues of Toronto. The only objection was the winter cold. That, he always tried to avoid. It was an amusing city, he assured her.

He was humorous, interesting—fascinating. And how he loved to talk. Suddenly Fanny thought she had discovered the reason for his pleasure in her company. She was a good listener! He could harangue and narrate to his heart's content, while she drank in his words. Probably he was used to very different treatment at home, poor man. His wife probably shut him up, or paid no attention. Undoubtedly she had heard all these things many times. And she wanted to talk herself, most likely, being the woman of varied interests and tremendous vitality that Fanny had come to realize she was. She smiled as she had a swift mental picture of the two at dinner, say—Magnus trying to expand, his wife intent upon her own anecdotes—neither listening to the other—anger—silence—sulks—mutual boredom.

But Fanny wasn't in the least bored. She listened eagerly to the information, detailed so picturesquely and with so much gusto by her host. He told her of some of his experiences in Europe, he described vividly scenes and people.

Shortly after nine, she suggested that she ought to go home. He agreed, a little reluctantly. But he was obviously anxious to show that he had no fell designs upon her.

He took her in a taxi to the street-corner near her home, still talking about England. He helped her out, thanked her for her company, shook hands, and departed.

At the office, next day, he mentioned briefly what a splendid evening he had had. He did not repeat the invitation until several more days had passed.

Then he said, "Orders for this evening. Same time, same place."

She did not hesitate. She said, "All right, Mr. Magnus."

Upon this occasion, he startled her by taking her to a restaurant not far from her own flat. She was astonished

to know that there was a famous eating-place in Brooklyn. "The Clarendon," it was called, and Magnus assured her that its food, especially its chops and steaks, could not be surpassed anywhere around New York. She quite believed the statement, especially when for dessert she was given a large slice of a tart, the most delicious piece of pastry she had ever encountered, all golden cream beneath, and upon the top great crimson fresh strawberries—in mid-January.

She asked him about his war-experiences, and he obliged with a campaign-travelogue more exciting than anything she had ever seen in print. People at neighboring tables smiled over his enthusiasm and the emphasis of his gestures. He was altogether modest concerning his own part in the fighting. From his brother's boasts, however, and from the scar upon his forehead, she knew that he had played his part gallantly.

His monologue enthralled her. And tears of pleasure came to her eyes when, voluntarily, and with no questioning on her part, he paid a tribute to the American troops.

"My—the boy I was engaged to—he was in the Marines," she said, slowly, keeping her eyes upon her plate.

"The Marines! They were wonderful!" he said, enthusiastically, "Everybody expected they'd take a long time to learn their business, but they went right to it. Almost as good as our own Canadians!" he finished with a laugh, "I'd say just as good, but—patriotism, you know."

She glowed. "I know they were wonderful," she said.

"And—ah—where's the young man now?"

"He—he got killed," she answered, in a low voice.

"I'm sorry," he said, simply. Then he launched into a description of the last drive, when his own regiment had fought in the same sector with Marines. He didn't overdo

his praise. But he made her feel that somehow he shared her pride in her dead lover.

They lingered late at the Clarendon—later, at any rate, than they had been at Fraunce's. "You're so near home," he said.

Again he deported himself with urbanity and with no trace of familiarity. It was while she was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking of the twinkling gravity with which he had said "Good-night—and we'll have another little party soon, won't we?" that she was suddenly alarmed at the important place he was taking in her life.

He was filling a want, a longing which she had always had, ever since Pa had gone. Someone to tell her stories! Someone who, like Pa, took her away from the drab everyday, lifted her, sent her imagination soaring—gave her wings.

At last, at last somebody had come along who carried her to mysterious places, shared with her marvelous adventures, talked to her of mighty deeds, of knights—latterday knights with machine-guns and airplanes in place of lances and milk-white steeds, but knights as authentic as any in the middle ages.

And he himself—he had been brave, and strong, and had fared forth to battle for the Right. And there was, within him, despite his funny ways, and his love of talking (it was a little pathetic, even though he did talk so beautifully) and his wife and his children and his career as a big lawyer—there was, shining out from him, the spirit of men who do things and go places.

She mustn't feel like this about him! It was insanity! She remembered how, all of a sudden, at the table, she had been

seized with the idea of leaning over and touching the silvered hair above his temple. At that moment she had been six years old again. And immediately afterwards, she had still wanted to smooth the hair, but now for a different reason: because he attracted her.

Many minutes she lay, thinking. At last she slept, but fitfully and nervously.

Next day at the office, Magnus remarked upon her paleness. He hoped the strawberries hadn't disagreed with her. She mumbled that "she was afraid they had, maybe." He was most kind, and told her she could go home early, he would see that Jim excused her. In spite of her protest, it was thus ordered. Mid-afternoon found her down at her shrine, swept by the freezing wind, still seeking an answer to the questions that were torturing her.

The next day, she went through her work quietly. Toward five, Magnus, who had asked several times whether she was recovered—receiving a hasty, "Oh, yes, thank you," each time—smiled benevolently, and she saw that twinkle come into his eye.

"Well, then, young lady, orders for this evening—"

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Magnus," she broke in, trying to soften her voice into the graciousness she felt but which her nervousness muffled, "But—but I have an engagement."

"Oh, have you? Well, that's a shame," he said, genuinely disappointed, "I was looking forward to taking you to such a—"

"Yes, I'm terribly sorry. I made this date—well, days ago," she lied, nodding her head violently up and down as if to convince him by emphasis.

"How about to-morrow night, then?"

"Well—you see—Ma's not very well—" she began. But

she felt immensely self-conscious. It was getting silly, the situation. "I'll see, Mr. Magnus."

"Don't you want to go?" he said, quizzically smiling; he didn't really believe that she didn't want to go, it was easy to see.

"Of course I do," she said. And of course she did. Only —oh, she had to have another day to puzzle over things, to try to pluck some sense from her bewilderment. She couldn't face him to-night, watch that kindly, mobile, young-old countenance, listen to that nice voice telling fascinating tales. She must have this respite, at least.

"All right," he answered, cheerfully, "We'll let it go at that. I hope you decide favorably. The fact is, there's something I want to talk to you about."

"Couldn't you—couldn't you talk now?" she said.

He regarded her gravely. "No," he said, gently. "It can wait. But—" he looked her in the eyes—"only till to-morrow."

He finished the letter, and dismissed her.

For some time after she had left the room, he sat teetering in his chair, staring at the point of a paper-knife he was drumming on the desk-top.

"My God, what a sweet child," he said aloud, finally, as he stood up, yawned and reached for his fur coat.

She kept revolving his statement in her mind. "Something I want to talk to you about." What could it be? Something important, there was no doubt of it. There was that strange look in his eye when he said it.

Ma's increasing alarm over her daughter's "actin' peculiar again" was redoubled that evening. Hardly a word at the table. Just "yes" and "no." And going directly from the meal to her room, locking herself in—

"If Ralph don't turn up Sunday," Ma thought, "I'm goin' to start takin' matters into my own hands."

5

Over in a corner of the Clarendon, at a secluded table they sat. She had been apprehensive at first, he general in his conversation; few narratives; numerous gently gay remarks. Her apprehension was not assuaged by the excellent meal, topped by a new sort of tart, even more delicious than the strawberry one: fresh pineapple with a whipped cream base.

He puffed at a cigar, and studied her face, smiling. She looked down at her plate. Then he leaned forward.

"Now!" she thought. She did not look up.

"How old are you, Fanny?" he said.

("Fanny"! The first time—and it didn't sound fresh—but it was a little peculiar.)

"Twenty-three," she answered.

"Twenty-three. I thought it was about that. Well, Fanny, you aren't any baby, are you? I mean—you're old enough to know a good deal about things. And you've got a good head on you. So—look, now. I'm going to talk straight to you. And I want you to promise me you won't be shocked—and you won't get mad. Will you?"

Fanny still did not look up. "I—how can I tell?" she said.

"I don't think you will," he said, his voice gaining earnestness, "Anyway—try not to be. You know I'm not a wild

man; you know I wouldn't insult you. You haven't anything to complain of in the way I've always treated you, have you?"

"No. No, indeed."

"All right, then. First-off, I want to say that I think you're one of the sweetest girls I've ever seen. You're pretty, you're a fine worker, you've got—well—taste. And you're the best company I've found in years."

Fanny shifted uncomfortably, even though the words of praise, uttered so sincerely, rang pleasantly in her ears. She was at a loss for an answer. She managed to look up at him, however, and saw him confident, and winning, and altogether attractive. She dropped her gaze again, immediately, and remained silent.

"It's a fact," he repeated, "I don't know anybody who has just what you seem to have. I mean—you never bore me. Oh, that sounds sort of condescending. Well—the more I see you, the better I like you. See?" And then, as the color began to suffuse her face, he continued, rapidly, "I suppose it's because I'm a queer sort of chap, myself. I've got a lot of curiosity, and I love to talk about things. You may have noticed it." He grinned.

She looked up, caught the grin, and had to smile, relieving her nervousness slightly.

"Yes," he went on, his grin growing, "I certainly have talked you black and blue. And that's the most charming thing about you—added to your being pretty, and a sweet child, and having sense. You let me rave along, and—why, you actually seem to enjoy hearing my yarns. There you are, you see. I know dozens of girls and women—well, perhaps hundreds would be nearer. Ugly and pretty, fat and thin, a lot of them very attractive—except this way: they haven't any curiosity. See what I mean?"

"N-not exactly."

"Oh, I think you do. Here, I'll put it another way. Take two actresses I know—pretty as peaches. But they're too wise. They're always getting off smart cracks. They're only interested in Broadway, and so on. Nice to look at, but—oh, well, they make me nervous. Then, there are all of Jim's friends—good people, but they're stupid and settled. Take the women in Toronto that my wife drags me around with when I can't get out of it. They're societyish. I can't go into that. They bore me stiff. Then—I suppose I ought not to say it. But I promised I'd talk straight out, and I'm going to. Martha—she's a very fine woman, good wife and all that. We—we get along. But she's busy over a thousand things of her own. She hasn't got much time for me. There's not much fun left in her, that's the whole truth. Understand?"

Fanny made a movement of bewilderment. "Mr. Magnus—I—I don't think—"

He leaned closer, and spoke in a lower tone, "I expect you're going to say you don't think I ought to talk about things that way to you. And you may be right. But you've got to understand how the situation is, so you might as well hear me through. Now, here's the point. I'm probably a little bit crazy, but I can't do like all these others. I can't settle down and—and rot. That's not my nature. Life's something different to me. It's exciting—it's finding out what it's all about, always something new. Curiosity, do you see?"

She nodded her head.

"That's why I like you. You've got it, too! Curiosity! Like biting into a new piece of pastry all the time. I can tell. But I believe you've never had much chance to gratify it. You've had to pretend a lot of things. And people are

rather unkind to people like you and me. They don't see why we shouldn't be like them, and be satisfied. You have to hide what you're thinking most of the time, don't you?"

Folding her napkin and refolding it, she nodded again.

He looked at her with a mixture of approval, paternal solicitude and challenge. His tones took on a persuasive color.

"Wouldn't you like to live the kind of life you've always dreamed about? Wouldn't you like to see beautiful places? Wouldn't you like to have the kind of clothes you always felt you'd look fine in? And delicious meals, and travel, and shows, and music, and be treated always like a lady? I know I'm not any young Romeo, but I think you realize I'm not a bad old party. You see what I'm getting at?"

(See? I've seen from the beginning. But it's impossible. Be untrue to everything I've built my life upon? No, never, never!)

"I couldn't," she said, trying to rise from her chair.

He reached across and grasped her hand. "Don't do that. I haven't insulted you, have I? I can't have—you aren't stupid, I'm lonely, and I'm terribly fond of you. And you like me—I wouldn't have thought of all this if you hadn't let me see that much, anyhow. Sit quiet again. Let me finish. Then you can decide."

She sank back into her chair, but, with a firmness which a quaver in her voice did not conceal, she said, "I've decided. It's no use—"

"Is that fair?" he interrupted, chuckling unexpectedly, "Suppose a judge treated me that way when I tried a case before him. When all the evidence and the arguments are in—that's the time to decide. Can't you give me an open mind, at least?"

She shook her head. "No—Mr. Magnus—I—"

"Of course you're right," he went on, gathering momentum. "The way regular, ordinary people think. But I'm not regular, and you're not—you know you're not."

"Yes, I am," she said, a trifle wistfully, "I am—"

"Why, you're so much better than regular!" he said, "You're so fine, and decent, and square! That's the real reason I like you so much. But you're different—you know you are. That's why you haven't pretended to be shocked, or that you don't know what I'm talking about. And you mustn't be silly, and throw all this away without thinking it over, from every angle. Look what I have to offer you. I have a great deal of money. I spend at least half my time away from Toronto. Think of the things we can see and do together! The fun we'll have! I can fix you up a fine place up there. You can visit back home any time you want to. You're clever—all anybody needs to know is that you're my private secretary."

"I couldn't, I couldn't!" she repeated, endeavoring to release her hand from his.

"Don't ever be worried about getting away with it. I have a marvelous reputation—people all think I'm a little strange, but I'm a highly respectable citizen, I assure you. I've had good-looking secretaries before—oh, don't worry. They never meant anything to me, I promise that. But you see what I mean. And I'm going to do a lot more traveling. Europe next summer—and not with Martha or any of the family. Alone, so far as anybody could know. Think of it—England, and France, and Spain—yes, sure, and Italy, too, if you want. We'll do it all up right, there won't be any danger of getting you into a scrape. You believe me, don't you?"

Fanny's eyes shone. But still she said only the phrases. "I couldn't!"

"Cuba first!" the lyric swing of his dictations crept into his urgings: he made the familiar, sweeping gestures. "The loveliest land the human eye has ever looked upon—that's what Columbus called it—yes, Christopher Columbus all those years ago. And he didn't see it the way it is now. The mountains, and the sea like a sapphire, and the hot sand, and the palms, and the mysterious night of the tropics, full of mystery—"

"Please don't—" she murmured.

He stopped, sat silent, looking at her. She would not let her eyes meet his.

In a different tone, a tone almost boyish in its simplicity, he said, "You could trust me, my dear girl. You mustn't think I'm trying to drag you into something that would hurt you. I'd always be good to you. I'd always take care of you. You believe that, don't you?"

She took a long breath, then softly said. "Yes. I do believe it. But I couldn't."

"I suppose I must make a pretty asinine spectacle," he said, after a pause, "Just the sort of thing you read about in the papers. Middle-aged man—old enough to know much better—trying to talk a very sweet young thing into doing something she thinks she ought not to do. Trying to get more out of life than I ought to, eh? I've got a good deal—why can't I be satisfied? Eh? But by God, you mean something to me that I'm not going to lose—not if I can help it! I refuse to sink down, and get stodgy and regular and—and—bridge, and my clubs, and golf, and the same old people, the same old things— Hell, I *will* not! People say, 'You can't eat your cake and have it, too.' Well, I don't believe it! I

never believed it! I've taken what I wanted, and I'm going to keep on, or find out why!"

(Yes, that's the kind of man he is. You can do that, when you know how to beat life. But I'm not that way. I can't do it except in dreams. It isn't right—for me. I have to hold on to the few things I'm sure of.)

Aloud she said, with a new firmness, "I guess there isn't any cake for me."

"There can be!" he retorted. "All you have to do is say to yourself, 'I know what I want, and I'm going to have it!' Then take it."

"No," she said, "No. There's other things—there's things I believe in."

He made one last effort. Wooing her with his voice, he said, "Only think of it! Next Saturday—the crowds waving and yelling, and the steamer slipping off, and good-by cold and slush and work—down to the summer seas, where it's warm and lovely, and lazy,—Romance, Fanny—Romance—"

He held the silence over her.

(You poor little fool—here it is—all you've ever imagined—handed to you on a silver platter—oh, you'll be sorry, you'll be sorry, when it's too late, and he's gone, and you have to trudge along the same old dismal way, flat and stale—you'll be sorry . . . but what would Pa think. Pa . . .)

At last Magnus spoke. "I'm glad you've said no. I'm very happy that all the things I've said haven't broken down your refusal."

"What? You are!" Fanny said, with astonishment.

"Of course I am," he leaned over, and she saw appreciation and admiration shining in his face, "Don't you see? If you weren't just exactly the kind of girl you are—sweet and

straight and dear—why, I wouldn't want you. I respect you, dear child, I admire you. And I'm very happy you've had the courage to be yourself. Do you understand?"

She stared at him.

"Nevertheless, I hope you change your mind. Think it all over. There's a whole week. I've booked passage for you. I shan't cancel it till the last moment. And—that's all. If you don't come, why—it's all right. I'll miss something beautiful, and so will you. But I'll understand, and love you for it."

He rose, and stood aside for her to pass.

He helped her into a taxi, and stood outside, holding her hand and looking at her with kindness and gentleness. "I'll let you alone, to think it all out," he said, "I shan't be at the office next week at all. You may go back to your regular work. If you decide to come with me, all you have to do is call me at Mrs. Van Zant's home. You have the number. I'm not going to give up hoping. If you decide against me—why, thank you, anyhow, for some of the happiest hours I have had in many years."

"Thank you!" she said, with a catch in her voice, "And don't think I'm angry, or anything. But—I just can't."

"Good-by, dear child," he said softly. Then he lifted her hand to his lips, and kissed it, once. He turned to the driver, gave Fanny's address, slammed the taxi-door, lifted his hat, and strode into the Clarendon.

Huddled in the seat, she began to cry. It was pleasant grief. He was such a dear! That little kiss on the hand—the only familiarity he had ever taken. And he understood. He was a gentleman, a real gentleman, all the way through. Oh, if she only could go with him—such a fine man—and a darling—but she couldn't—she couldn't—George—her George—forever and ever. . . .

6

She thought it was all settled, and straightened out in her mind. She had done the right thing, the only possible thing. She was almost happy.

But merely the half day, Saturday, of working at the old, familiar grind bored her almost into hysteria. The dull creaking of petty minds slavishly intent upon their wretched little jobs. . . .

Misery grew within her, a sharp longing for Magnus' zestful and refreshing approach to ideas that were stimulating.

Was the not seeing him going to be like this—a continual, increasing ache?

7

Sunday morning she stayed away from breakfast; she lay in bed, going over and over the situation. Just before dinner, Ralph called her. No, she was sorry, she was going

out. Ma protested, at the table, against the cavalier treatment of her favorite.

Fanny vouchsafed only the information that she "couldn't help it. She was going somewheres with Katie."

There was a mild argument, during which Fred got in several of his phrases uncomplimentary to her appearance and attitude. She bolted her food, and left her baked apple untouched. She looked in vain toward Zelda for sympathy. That former ally had long since been reduced to a tepid echo of her husband.

No help, no aid on any side. Here she was, trying to be good—and everybody only made it the harder!

Desperate, she escaped, and took a taxi, defiantly at her very door. She knew Ma was craning out the window, and witnessing her extravagance.

Well—who cared? The snow was falling rapidly, and she had a definite objective in mind, to which she was hurrying.

She took the subway at Clark Street, dashed to the shuttle, and reached Grand Central just as the only train stopping at Woodlawn was pulling out. Gasping, she ran, pursuing it down the track, and swung to the back platform.

Arrived at the cemetery, she waded through the snow to the small headstone that marked the resting-place of her father. She stood and looked at it a long time.

Round and round in her head whirled her problems. Impulsively, she threw herself to her knees in the slush, and, her lips close to the stone, she whispered, "Pa! Pa! Tell me what to do!"

She waited.

It seemed to her that words began to form somewhere in her inner ear. They took form. Now they were clear.

"Be true . . . be true . . . be true. . . ."

She rose. Now she was sure. Her heart was light.

Be true—to George? Perhaps. But, most, to herself.

She did not mind the long, dreary streetcar rides home. She paid no attention to her sopping shoes, or to her dripping dress. Now she was comforted. She had asked Pa, and he had told her. . . .

8

She wished, Monday morning, that she had changed her wet clothing more quickly after her visit to Woodlawn. Her head felt dull and thick.

In the afternoon, she borrowed some aspirin from Katie.

"Here y'are," said her friend, then peered closely at her, "Say, what's the matter with you, kid? You look terrible."

"Do I?"

"You said it—do I. Look, now—what's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"You're just a little liar. Listen, Fan—you got somethin' on your chest. Why don't you spill it?"

"It's nothing, I tell you."

Katie slipped an arm around her. "I'll knock you down! Now I tell you what you're goin' to do—you're comin' home with me, and we're goin' to have a real old-fashion' gab-fest. You been treatin' me somethin' shameful lately, and I ain't goin' to stand for it. See?"

To Katie's flat Fanny went, then. And in response to

wheedlings, cajolings, and scoldings, gradually she unburdened herself of the whole story.

Katie rocked her in her arms. "Poor Fanny—poor little Fanny!" she said, "Why the devil didn't you come and get rid of it to old Katie long ago? I had a lot of hunches—but if you wouldn't—well, I couldn't make you."

"I had to figure it out myself. And now I know I did right."

Katie was silent, rocking, then said, "Yeh, I s'pose you gotta do the way you gotta. Oh, Poppa, though! Maybe I don't wisht I had the chance!"

Earnestly Fanny asked her, "Would you go, Katie? Would you? With everything the way it is, would you, honest?"

"Would I! Listen, kid—you're only young once. You been good all your life—and what has it got you? Only a few large crates of razzberries. But—well, you're you, and nothin' can't change you. Every family tree has got to have its sap—and you're yours."

"All right—I'm the sap." Fanny laughed, serenely.

She left early, and tortured Fred by sitting in front of her Victrola, tranquilly listening to the "Sweetheart" record.

9

On Tuesday morning occurred the altercation over Fred's contemplated party. She refused, positively, to be subjected to the horror of an evening during which vulgar ex-members

of the Quartermaster Corps did nothing but talk about the army as if they had been the superiors of George. And the oafish love-making of Harry Kennedy—that, on top of the decisions she had been faced with—

Besides, her head ached, dully, and she was sniffling a bit.

She left Fred furious, and her mother incensed and at wits' end.

It was then that Ma called Ralph, and gave him peremptory orders.

So that, immediately after supper Tuesday night, the whole family went out to the movies, leaving the coast clear for Ralph.

10

He rang the doorbell as Fanny was lying upon the sofa, half-asleep. From the battered trunk beneath her bed she had hauled out the ancient copy of "King Arthur." It had been over a year since she had looked at it. Now, drowsily, she turned the pages, and studied the familiar illustrations. Vaguely she was comforted. Pa was mistily in the room, talking to her. She studied the one of Lancelot, which reminded her, probably because she wanted it to, of George. There was no picture in the whole book that looked like Colonel Magnus. Not one. Wasn't that a sign?

A slight pain back of her eyes reminded her that she was out of aspirin. Oh, well, maybe what she needed was sleep. She closed her eyes, and found relief in lying there,

alone and unbothered, thinking nothing, making her mind a blank.

The bell rang, then, first timidly, then with insistence. Frowning a little, at the third repetition she arose, and went to open the door. Ralph, upon the point of pressing the button again, stopped immediately, gasped twice and burst into an excited flow of words.

"Fanny! Gosh, I'm glad! I was just about to give up! Gee, Fan, I'm glad to see you! I got some news—grand news! Wait'll you hear it—"

Fanny smiled, but in the tones of a mother gently reproving a violent little boy, she said, "Just a minute. Take your coat off out there and stamp your shoes. Can't have you dropping snow all over the room."

"But Fanny—" he remonstrated, dropping his violin-case at her feet, "Gosh, this is important—"

"Hang up your coat and stamp your feet," she repeated, inexorably. As, with a deflated look, he began to remove the overcoat, she picked up the violin-case, carried it into the room, and with an old rag from the table drawer wiped from it carefully most of the moisture.

In a moment he dashed into the room, slamming the door behind him. He cast a grateful look at her for what she was doing to the violin-case, then launched again into his news.

"Well—it's happened at last! I been trying to get up the nerve for a month, now, ever since old Barnes started talking about firing McCullough from the branch store, so to-day I said to myself, 'It's now or never!', so I went right in there, and handed it to him straight, and he hemmed and hawed a minute, and said he'd have to see, but I said, 'All right, then, Mr. Barnes, there's two other people after me, and I been stalling them off, but I guess I'll have to pick out

one or the other'—of course, that was all a lie—but it worked! Doggone, he gave in, what do you know? So I got it! Manager of the branch, and raised to eighty per—eighty smackers each and every week! And—"

Fanny held her hands to her ears, humorously. "Wait, wait!" she cried, "Slow down! One thing at a time! My head aches already, and you're making it go round and round. Here, sit down, Ralph, for goodness sake!" She gave him an example by falling upon the sofa.

"I can't sit down! I don't want to!" he exclaimed, walking excitedly in front of her, "I couldn't wait to tell you. I knew I'd get it some day. All you need is nerve! Just think of it—manager of the branch, and right in line to take over the big store when the old bird retires. Isn't it the berries?"

"It certainly is," she agreed, heartily. "Oh, Ralph, it's simply fine!"

"And he can't last forever!" he went on, "I mean—he's getting sort of feeble, and why should he keep on? He ought to retire, and enjoy himself. And don't you see—maybe two years, that's enough for me to get all the in and outs of the business. So then I'll buy him out—give him a little cash, and the rest notes. Don't it all work out like a dream?"

"It's wonderful!" she said warmly, "Well, I knew you could do it!"

"Sure!" he agreed, "And think of the dough I'll be getting! Almost forty-two hundred simoleons per year! That sure isn't terrible for a fella only twenty-five, now is it?"

"I should say it isn't!" Fanny said. Then, immediately on her guard at the look she detected coming into his face, she endeavored to switch the trend of the conversation, "But—you won't get much time to practice your fiddle—"

"No, I guess not," he interrupted impatiently. "But that

don't matter much. I'll have to work twice as hard, but it's worth it when you're getting real money, and you got something real to work for. I don't suppose I'd ever be much of a violinist, anyhow. Anyways, what do I care about the violin, if you'll only—"

Desperately, trying to save him from hurt, she interrupted again. "But you know how much I love to hear you play. And I think you have the makings—"

"Don't try to put me off!" he said, intensely, stopping before her and looking her straight in the face, "You know what I'm trying to say! I never felt I had enough money, really, before. And I was—"

"Don't, Ralph! Please don't! I hate to hurt you—"

"I was willing to wait," he continued, doggedly, "But now I'll get plenty for two to live on, and—"

"Ralph! Please, please don't go on."

He threw himself on his knees beside the sofa, and pleaded, "Give me a chance! I *did* keep my promise, didn't I? All these months? You know I did. But it's different, now—"

With sad firmness, she said, "No, no. It isn't. Anyway, I'm not different. I've told you and told you—"

"I can't help it! I *got* to keep on. There ain't anything in the world means anything, except it means something to you!"

"It does mean something to me!" she protested, "I'm proud of you. I'm so glad to see you getting along—"

"Glad! Glad!" he laughed, bitterly, "That's a lot of help! You've shut me up before, because I wanted to wait till I had something real to offer you. Now I've got it. Oh, Fanny!" his eyes were big and longing, "You're lonely, and I want you so! We could have such a nice little place—you can quit working—you can be your own boss—you can run

everything—I love you so much—I don't care whether you love me or not—" He stared at her in an agony of pleading, unable to speak more.

Fanny reached out instinctively and touched his hand. With considerable tenderness, she began to speak. "You mustn't go on this way, dear. I told you I didn't want to hurt you. I hate to. But I've got to tell you the same thing. I like you a lot—it's wonderful to have you for a friend. You're about the only real friend I have in the world—except maybe Katie. But I can't marry you. I can't. I don't love you that way."

In anguish, he said, "But how do you know you can't? Or how do you know you mightn't to? Can't you try, and see what happens? Only give me a chance—that's all I want!"

Fanny could not look at him, so pitiful he seemed. Her eyes averted, she stroked his hair absently. "It wouldn't be fair," she said, "and it wouldn't be any use. I'd only make you terribly unhappy."

"I won't believe you! I won't!"

"If I loved a person—if I loved you—oh, how can I make you understand? I've tried so many times. Don't you think I know what it's like, really loving somebody?"

"What do I care about anybody else?" he said, pitifully angry, "And didn't I tell you I don't care if you love me—now, anyhow—"

"But I care," she said, "and any imitation won't do for me. The way I felt about . . . George . . . it was like I was going crazy, if he even looked at me—"

"George! George!" he gave a frantic groan, "Ain't there anybody else ever going to be in the world?"

She spoke in a hushed tone, immensely impressive, "When he was with me, there wasn't anybody else alive—just us

two, all alone together—and it was like beautiful bells, ringing and ringing—oh—" She buried her face in her hands.

"That's—that's the way I feel about you," Ralph choked. He stared pitifully at her.

She looked up at him again, after a long while. Her eyes were wet, and there was a deep tenderness about her. "I wish I could love you like that!" she said, very low, "I do wish I could. I like you such a lot. But it isn't anything you can make yourself do. It just happens, or else . . . and if you don't feel it, it's impossible. . . . You're the opposite kind, that's all. You're the sweetest boy I ever knew. But you're a boy, that's what you are—just a sweet boy, a sweet little boy—"

In angry despair he raised his voice. "I don't try to make out I'm any damn cave-man, or any stuff like that! But I love you, and I'd do anything for you. And I can take you out of this rotten place, and give you things. That's all I want, just to do things for you, and keep doing them! We could have such a swell little place—and in the evenings, if you wanted to stay home, I could play to you, the way you always like —you're so beautiful, you're what all the music *means*—"

Fanny clung to his hand. "It isn't your fault! You're darling, and fine. But don't you understand—it's a different kind of fine. George—he was so brave, he was so strong—danger, and adventures, and going faraway places—he was a real man!"

In anguished desperation, Ralph blurted out, "But he's dead! And I'm right here, and you're right here—"

He flinched at his own temerity, expecting cold rage from her. She only looked at him with directness, and said with utmost conviction, "Yes, he *is* dead. But he's the only kind

of a man I could love. He was a knight, like Pa used to talk about. And I don't guess there's many like him, anywhere." She stared in front of her, she thought of Magnus flashing through her mind, and being shut out with as strong determination as if he were physically locked outside an iron door.

Ralph checked the angry retort which all but burst forth. "Bunk! Bunk!" he wanted to yell. But he knew that such a comment would ruin his chances forever. Conscious, too, of the sorry spectacle he made from the romantic angle, he pulled himself abruptly to his feet, and walked bitterly toward the Victrola. He glared helplessly at the photograph of George, enshrined upon the flag. How he longed to hit out at it, smash it to bits, grind the glass and the wood and the pasteboard under his feet. Then he turned and saw her, bent and sad. All his fury vanished. Miserably he tried to collect words. He swallowed several times, dry-mouthed. Rooted there, he said, "Well—hell. . . . So—it's all just a waste. Raise,—new job—big chance—what I been dreaming about and working for—oh, God-damn it! Nothing's worth anything!"

Fanny said, compassionately, "I begged you not to—not to fall in love with me. Way back there, so many years ago. I thought you got cured, sort of. Why couldn't you ever leave it so we were just friends? I always played square with you, didn't I?"

His face curled with misery. "Oh, I know it. It's all my fault. All the way through. You acted square, all right. Only—that don't keep it from hurtin' like hell, just the same."

Fanny made a compassionate gesture toward him, and half-rose. He turned his back upon her, shook his shoulders as if shaking her glance from him. "Well, there's only one thing

I can do," he muttered. "I can't stand it any longer. I got to cut it off clean this time. I'll—I'll have to quit ever seeing you again. Maybe I can get over it—some way—"

His voice trailed off into silence. He leaned over and picked up his violin-case.

Fanny spoke earnestly. "You're right. That's the only thing to do. And—and you'll get over it. You'll see I'm not worth it."

"So, it's all ruined," he said, looking down the case, "Even my learning to play pretty good—that was just for you."

Fanny felt a growing sense of loss invading her. She could not keep herself from saying, "I'll miss you, Ralph. You—you help a lot. I'm so lonely, most of the time—"

"Lonely!" he cut in, with bitterness. "Maybe I don't know what being lonely is! All my life—until I found you. . . . And you don't want me—"

"Don't say it that way!" she begged, "There never was anybody I wanted so much for a friend. And I'll miss your playing, too. I do love it. It always helps, so. It makes things stop hurting, a little while. I just shut my eyes, and it takes me away, far off, to places I didn't ever see. I don't mean wild—it's soothing, and sweet. Like—like little hands, smoothing me off. . . ." She lay back on the sofa, holding one hand over her eyes.

"Oh, cut it out, can't you!" he cried. "Good-by!" he cried again, and ran to the door.

"Good-by, Ralph, dear," she called.

She waited, dully pained, for the door to close. She looked up to see him coming once more toward her, dragging his coat on the floor, while with fumbling hands he undid the catch to his violin-case.

He cleared his throat, and said, "I'm going. And I won't

come back. I won't bother you any more. Only first—I can't —I mean, I got to do something first."

The overcoat dropped in a bedraggled heap. He held the violin in trembling fingers. He cleared his throat again.

"It's—it's a piece I been practicing a month, now. I was saving it. I guess I do it pretty good. It's the—the one that means the way you make me feel. I guess I won't ever be able to play it any more."

She did not speak. He plucked the strings softly, miserably, tuning them. He attempted a smile. "It's Russian, with a long name. Tschaikowski, he wrote it. The name is in German, I got a friend to translate it for me. 'Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennst weiszt wass ich leide.' He says it means, 'Only the one that knows longing can know what I am suffering.'"

He raised the violin, and commenced to play, softly. His hands shook. He took the violin down, and tried to retune one of the strings. It snapped.

"Oh, God damn it!" he cried, and dropped to his knees beside her. He buried his face in her breast, and his shoulders shook.

Sadly she smoothed his hair, until he mastered the quivering of his back. Then she lifted his face, and gently kissed his lips.

He jerked his head up, got roughly to his feet. "Oh, God! It's only like you was my mother!"

"Yes," she said, quietly.

He flung himself away from her, groped for his hat and coat, still clutching his violin. As if blind, he made for the door. Nearing it, he turned, and said, strangling, "G'by!"

His feet caught in the trailing coat. He tripped headlong. The violin flew one way, the case the other.

Fanny leaped to her feet. "Oh—your violin!"

But already he had scrambled erect, and was guarding his instrument from her.

"Never mind!" he flung at her, bitterly, "What do you care, anyway?"

And not looking at her again, he plunged through the door, and was gone.

Fanny felt no slightest impulse to laugh at his ridiculous, sorry figure. Instead, her eyes clouded. She swung away from the door.

II

She was already in bed when the family came back from the movies. Ma, bursting with curiosity, was baffled. Once she started toward Fanny's room, but halted. No, the morning would be time enough.

But in the morning Fanny said she wasn't hungry, paused only for a cup of coffee, hastily drained, and made an effort to leave before she could be questioned. But Fred was too quick for her.

"Hey! Don't forget about the party," he said, menacingly.

"I told you once I can't come," she replied.

"Ma! Hey, Ma!" Fred called, holding tight to Fanny's arm.

Ma appeared.

"She's goin' to run out on us," he said.

Ma tried anxious raillery. "Maybe she's got something more important," she said. Then addressing Fanny, "If it's Ralph—why, bring him."

"In a pig's ear! That goof!" Fred remonstrated, receiving a furious look from Ma.

"Don't worry. It's not Ralph. But I just won't come, and you can like it or lump it." She jerked herself from Fred's grasp.

"Not—" Ma began. Then, fearful, she said, "But—last night—didn't he come over?"

Fanny looked at her mother with calm defiance. "Certainly—he came over." She turned and went out.

Ma's face was white.

"If you don't show up, I'll make it hot for you!" Fred yelled after Fanny.

Ma reached for the telephone.

Fred, growling, went for his hat and coat.

When he returned, he found his mother clinging to the table on which the telephone stood.

"Gee, Ma—what's eatin' you!" he said.

In a devastated tone she answered, "It's—Fanny."

"Yeh, she sure is one wet smack."

"Ralph—he's just got a wonderful new job."

"Him! That ape!"

Ma faced him, and said with the voice of one pronouncing doom, "He asked her to marry him last night. And she turned him down. Turned him down!"

Fred made a wry face. "Well—what do you expect me to do? Bust out cryin'?"

Ma rose. "Fred! Will you be human for once in your life? Can't you see this has knocked my feet right out from me?"

Then all the pent-up bitterness, anxiety, fear burst from

her. Fred's eyes opened wide as she talked, making him understand how much she had counted upon Ralph to rescue Fanny.

"I tell you, Fred," she finished, in awful earnestness, "this George Business—I'm afraid she's goin' crazy. Yes, crazy. Now do you see?"

He remained silent for a few moments. He was really impressed at last. His eyes shifted. Finally, he blurted, "Well—I can tell you how to fix it."

"You!" she said, scornfully and hopelessly.

"Yeh—me. You got a way to kill it off, once and for all."

"I have—what?"

"Well—I s'pose I'm a fool to let you get this on me, but hell—I guess this is a desprit time, like you says. So—well—one time about a month ago I was lookin' for a screwdriver, and I got pokin' around the drawers in the sewin' machine—" He stopped, and looked furtively at her.

"The sewin'-machine—"

"Yeh," he muttered, "I got jerkin' at the drawers, and one of 'em was the one you kept locked, but I got it open, and—"

"You saw—it?"

He nodded.

"You . . . read it?"

He nodded again.

She stared at him. "So—you know it then. You dirty sneak!"

"Aw—what do you mean? What's the harm?"

"Ain't anything sacred to you? Did you tell Zelda?"

"Naw, I ain't told anybody—yet."

"Yet! Fred Williams, if you ever breathe one word about that letter—"

"Aw, be yourself! I ain't peeped, have I?"

Ma wrung her hands. "Oh, my God! I can't trust you! Not for a second."

Fred assumed an air of outraged virtue. "I been closer'n a clam about it, Ma. I wouldn't never of mentioned it, only I want to help you. Tell you the truth, I was savin' it for sometime when her and me has a real knock-down-and-drag-out. But this is different. I see what you're drivin' at. I believe you're right. I said all along she was goin' nuts. So—the only thing you can do is to kill her or cure her."

Ma searched his face. "It might make things all the worse. He's what she's been hangin' onto all these months—it's like people get hipped on religion. Oh, I ain't thought of anything else, over and over. I don't know. I don't know!"

"Kill or cure, Ma." He sucked his teeth.

"And now that *you* know—" she said, despairingly.

"Oh, well—I promise I won't spill it. You're the one. It's your letter."

"But—but how can I? How can I?"

Fred scratched his head. "I tell you. Talk to her straight about this Ralph. Make it as strong as you know how to. Then, if she still gives him the gate—why, do your duty. The letter'll fix it—why, she'll be so sore at George she'll just naturally bounce off to the dumb-bell, see? That's your only chance, now I'm tellin' you."

Ma said nothing. She sat motionless, digging her fingernails into her palms.

Fred picked up his overcoat. He went to the door.

"Kill or cure, Ma."

After a while, Ma got to her feet, and went slowly to the sewing-machine.

12

"You're a nit-wit to go back there at all to-night," Katie remarked, preparing to rise from the table at Childs', where she and Fanny had eaten a slow if inexpensive dinner, "They'll grab onto you, and you'll have a row with that dandy brother of yours."

"Maybe I can just slip in and slip out again," Fanny replied.

"Fat chance! You know darn well he's not goin' to let you do any slippin'. Listen. You can use one of my nightgowns, and a tooth-brush ain't but thirty-five cents. I'll call up your Ma, and tell her you're goin' to stay with me."

Fanny pondered. "But if I'm going to stay two nights—I hate to put on the same things to-morrow. You know what I mean."

"Gosh—ain't we stylish! Look—what you got on now is all right, ain't it? Well, you can go home to-morrow and get some more things. Then you won't have to run into the Boy Scouts."

Fanny shook her head. "I guess I better do it this way. You see, Ma must be awful upset—calling up three times like that. It won't take long. Then I'll get right over."

"You don't think she's heard somethin' about the Canadian Wallie Reid, do you?"

"No. How could she? Besides, I haven't done anything for anybody to get excited about."

"No?" asked Katie, putting her head on one side.

"You know what I mean. Nothing to be ashamed of. Why, I told you he never did anything worse than kiss my hand!"

Katie laughed. "Worse? Sure you don't mean 'better'? Now—now—don't get huffy," she added, as Fanny stiffened, "I ain't goin' to get on that stuff again. You can't help bein' noble, and I s'pose you won't be very sorry afterwards. When does he sail?"

"Day after to-morrow, I guess," Fanny murmured. "Now please shut up about him, or I swear I won't come over to your place at all—"

"I'm shut!" Katie replied with alacrity, and arose. "Gee, I wisht I didn't have the boy-friend comin' at quarter to eight. I oughta go with you and see they don't kidnap you."

"Don't worry," said Fanny, "I can handle them. It's only Ma. And I have a good idea what that's all about. Ralph's told her, of course."

"Well, what do you let her get at you to-night for, then? If you're stuffed up with cold—"

"I'm not stuffed up. It's almost gone—only hurts my eyes a little. And I might as well have it out now and get it over with. I'm so sick and tired of all these things— If I don't get a little peace soon, I'll go out of my head."

"And that ain't no bed-time story, Fan!" said Katie, unexpectedly, and threw her arm about her friend's waist, "Well, you're a stubborn thing, and you got to go your own way, if it kills you, I s'pose. All right, go on, and get your fancy duds, and come back as soon as you can. Don't be too tough on poor Ralphie when you talk about him to your Ma. He ain't such a total loss, after all."

"Don't worry about me," Fanny assured her, "And if you want to go out to a movie, go ahead, only leave the key under the mat."

A light snow had begun to fall, she noted with disgust. It threatened to increase. Oh, Lord! Snow—slush—mush—ice—cold—forever and ever and ever! While down in Cuba—No, no. That was a finished chapter. Not a chapter, a whole story. "The End," like they put at the bottom of the serial in the paper, when the heroine wins out against the villain, and marries the nice hero, and lives happily ever after. Marries! Happily ever after! Why can't she ever marry the villain? He's always so much more attractive than anybody else. . . . Because he doesn't want to marry. Just do her dirt, that's all he wants. Or he's married already. . . . No, right is right, and wrong's wrong. The people that write the stories know, after all. . . .

So musing tiredly, while her eyeballs ached, and the snowdrops pinged against her face, she climbed wearily the stairs to the flat. She heard, even before she turned the key in the lock, raucous laughter, and like the quacking of some monstrous duck, Fred's voice.

Resolutely she pushed into the smoke-filled room. Her eye caught quickly, clotted around the table, her brother, standing, guffawing and issuing orders; Zelda, tittering foolishly; Harry Kennedy, reaching for a bottle of gin; May Updike, one of Zelda's friends; and three anonymous young men. There were two empty seats—one ostentatiously for her. She wondered where Ma could be.

"Come on there, Kitchen Police!" Fred was shouting, in the direction of Kennedy: "More ginger ale and scrambambuled eggs! Snap into it!" He slapped Kennedy's shoulder.

Harry arose, and at that moment Fred saw Fanny, who was endeavoring to make her way across the room unnoticed.

"Well, well! If it ain't the little sister!" he howled, with mock-joviality. "Better late than never!" He jumped from his chair and, rushing to her, grabbed her arm. "Boys, I guess you don't know the pride of the family. This is Fanny, and these here is—" pointing with his thumb to the three strangers, "Spud Hanson, and Frank O'Malley and Ollie Happer. Sling the body down next to Harry—he thinks you're the darbs." He pulled her toward one of the empty chairs.

She held back, courageously. Calmly, in a low voice, she said, "No thanks. I've had dinner."

"Have some rat-poison then!" he yelled, tightening his hold on her arm, "What'll it be—almost-gin or good old red-eye?"

"I don't want anything to drink," she said, "besides, I want to see Ma. Where is she?"

"Aw, forget Ma. You'll see her all right. Sit down, will you, before I knock you down? Your Ralphie wouldn't come. He's stood you up. But they's plenty other company. Here's old Harry for you."

Jerking her arm suddenly from Fred's grasp, she said, "I'm sorry, but I can't." She started across the floor.

Fred darted after her, roaring "No you don't!" The company shifted with embarrassment. Kennedy seized Fred by the seat of the trousers, as he went by, stopping him with a jerk.

"Aw, let her alone, Fred," he said. "Maybe she's tired."

Fred whirled on him viciously. "Mind your own business!" He shook himself free, and hurried savagely after Fanny,

who unfortunately had not quite gained the shelter of her own room. He thrust his foot in the door-crack, and pushed in after her.

"Too good for the likes of us, hey?" he snapped.

Fanny tried to remain calm. "You know it isn't that. It's only—all this army talk—and the things it makes me think about—"

Fred made an angry gesture. "Think! Why don't you cut out thinkin' for a while? Maybe you might be some good to somebody, and not go draggin' around with a mush on you like a watermelon."

"That's all right, Fred," she answered, still endeavoring to keep matters fairly calm. "You don't like my ways, and I don't like yours. So what do you bother about me for?"

"Because you make me sick!" he shouted, "You gimme a pain in the neck! You're makin' a damn fool of yourself. Oh, it ain't just me says so. Everybody!"

"Very well. Then just let the damn fool alone." She reached over and commenced putting some articles into a small traveling-bag, ignoring him.

He knocked the bag out of her hands. "Are you goin' in there and be decent and help me entertain these folks?"

"No!" she said, her eyes blazing.

"Can't you forget that damn dumb marine, even for a second?"

In a voice hard with loathing, she replied, "That's right. Say all you like against him. If he was alive, he'd show you what kind of a coward you are!"

Fred laughed, jeeringly. "Well—he's dead, ain't he? Or is he? Anyways, mewin' around like a sick cat ain't goin' to bring him back. You goin' to spend the rest of your life

spreadin' this bull about—" he mimicked her in a shrill falsetto, " 'Bein' faithful to his memory'?"

"Yes! And if you don't get out of here—"

Ma entered, her face set. "Get out, Fred."

Fred started to reply. Then, at another look from Ma, he slammed the door after him, with a noise like an explosion.

Fanny continued fumbling with the bag. Ma sat down on the bed. With a strained anxiety, she hunted about for words to begin talking. If only she could find a common ground of sympathy with this daughter of hers whom she loved as if from the other side of an impermeable wall! Twice she licked her lips, and twice she was at a loss.

Fanny spoke first, cool, detached, as always. "Well, Ma? It's about Ralph, I suppose?"

"Yes, it's about Ralph. He says you—he says he—"

"Yes, Ma. You sicked him on me again, didn't you?"

Ma remained silent.

"I can't help it, Ma. I'm sorry, but it's no use."

"What did you do to him? He's terrible cut up."

Fanny sighed impatiently. "I didn't do anything to him. He said he had a fine new position, and asked me to marry him again. I thought we might as well get it over with once and for all. Maybe he didn't believe me before when I said no, but I guess he does now."

Ma looked at her, helplessly. "I told him not to believe you. I told him you was just upset, and you might—"

Fanny's voice was cold and clear. "You didn't have any right to. I'm running my own business. You don't do any good giving him these silly ideas. I know what I'm doing. I wish you'd keep out of my affairs, Ma."

Ma sat, her eyes riveted on her daughter. "God knows I don't interfere much. 'Live and let live'—that's the way I've

always tried. If I was some mothers—but you know I let you keep yourself to yourself." She was silent a moment. Then, her voice trembled. "I can't bear it, you goin' on this way. It's terrible for you. Fanny—it's terrible for all of us!"

Fanny compressed her lips. "I heard all that before, Ma. I know I'm a nuisance around here. Maybe I better get out. Katie wants me to come live with her. It just seems to be scrap, scrap, scrap here."

Ma took up that remark. "Maybe so. I admit Fred's pretty bad. But he ain't altogether to blame—not altogether. You think it's any pleasure for us to see you mopin' like you do? Things has got to the place where they can't go much further."

"That's what I say, Ma," Fanny said, "So I guess I ought to get out."

"Can't you ever act like a human bein'?" Ma suddenly cried. "What are you made out of, anyways? Ice? I'm your Ma, Fanny! Can't you talk to me once in a while?"

Fanny was a little shaken. More softly she said, "But Ma —what's there to talk about? I told you and told you how I feel about him."

"What's the matter with him? What is it? Don't you like him at all?"

"Sure, I like him," Fanny answered, wearily. "But there's all the difference in the world between— Oh, Ma, this is just wasting breath."

"He's a fine boy, that's what he is. He's crazy about you, and he's makin' his way. He'd be a grand husband for you. You like him. Well, what in God's world are you lookin' for?"

Fanny looked straight at her mother. "Listen, Ma. Is he the kind of a boy you'd of married?"

Ma answered immediately. "Is he! I only wisht to heaven somebody like him had come along when I was a girl—instead of what did."

Fanny made an impatient gesture. "What's the use of tryin' to fool me, Ma?"

Ma raised her right hand on high. "I swear as sure as I'm sittin' here—that's the kind of a man I'd oughta of picked out! And you, too, if you had any sense in your head!"

"Oh, Ma! To think you'd say a silly thing like that! As if I'd marry anybody just because they'd be nice to me! Don't you know me any better than that?"

Ma drew herself up to her feet, and stood facing Fanny, directly in front of her. "Know you! So I know you! All your life you tried to keep me away from you; you tried to push me away, and creep off by yourself, and make a stranger out of me. You think that done any good? Don't fool yourself! What you do—that's one thing. But what you think, and why you think that way—don't I read you, though! And why? Because you're my own flesh and blood, that's why! Whose daughter do you think you are, anyways?"

"Pa's!" Fanny flashed.

"Oh, yes. Your Pa's, God help you! But you're mine too, God help me! Fred—he's all the worst of your Pa, and none of the best. But you—don't you think you can get away from it! For all the world you're as much me as you ever was your Pa, and you can say you ain't till you turn black!"

Fanny tried wavering sarcasm. "Oh, am I!"

"Yes, yes, you are! Don't I know why you got crazy wild about a romantical man? Ain't it me, all over again? Why do you s'pose I picked out your Pa, from all the men I knew? Because my head was all full of the same notions yours is.

And I threw myself away, that's what I did! Threw myself away!"

Fanny, knowing that if she said anything, it would be so strong a defense of her father that it would hurt and sting, bit her lip.

"Oh, don't hold it back!" Ma continued at once, "I know what you want to say. Somethin' about your Pa not gettin' any too good a bargain, either. But that's what I'm tellin' you! This romantical stuff—it's all a fake! You dream about it, and hope about it—but when it's all said and done, and you got to look life in the face, love, that's what you want! Real affection, and somebody that cares about you, not runnin' off to God knows where, restless and wild! A home that you can call a home, and nice things, and a good man that'll stick by you, I'm tellin' you! And I only wisht to God somebody'd told me. Oh, it's hard to believe—don't I know? But you got to believe me—you got to take a hold of yourself, and shake all these notions out of your head!"

Fanny spoke frigidly. "If you understand me so well, don't you see it's hopeless to try to make me think any differently?"

"I got to! You're my own daughter, and believe it or not, I love you. Oh, not the way people suppose mothers love daughters, but my own queer way. And I see you goin' to pieces. I'm bound I'm goin' to talk, I'm beggin' you, I'm pleadin' with you! You ain't so young as you was. This is a great chance you got. Don't ruin your life by passin' it up, and moonin' around lookin' for somebody that couldn't possibly live up to what you dream about 'em if you ever found 'em!"

"As if I didn't find him!" Fanny returned, with bitter scorn.

"That's all right—but that's done with. Here's Ralph—as fine a boy as I ever seen, so help me! I don't say marry him right away. Only don't drive him off. Try to get used to him. You won't never regret it!"

"Ma! And you trying to make out you understand me! Ralph—after George—"

Her mother tried in vain to ignore the name. Then she cried, "George! George! I never was so sick of any—"

Fanny's face became instantly a mask. "I guess that's enough talking," she said, and turned her back with deliberation.

Ma, desperate, followed her. "Is it? Well, you're goin' to find out if it is! Every day and night for the last two years—George this and George that! If you knowed the truth about your precious George—"

Fanny wheeled on her mother, "What's that? What did you say?"

Already Ma was fearful of her approach to a subject so dangerous, so irrevocably revelatory. She attempted to back up. "I'm just tryin' to make you see things with a little sense. Of course you loved George, and I knowed it, and I've put up with all this foolishness—"

Fanny, enraged, ejaculated: "Foolishness!"

"I didn't mean that," Ma floundered, "I mean—nobody in the world could expect you to go on mournin' like this. It's time you was gettin' a little bit cured. It ain't human, the way you do!"

Fanny took up her bag. "I won't listen!"

"You got to listen!" Ma pleaded, in exasperation and fright. "You got to come to your senses! I know Ralph ain't like George. I know he ain't one of them wild, wonderful kind. But he's got things that George couldn't never have had.

You listen to me! It ain't what you do with your feet and your hands and goin's on that's real adventure. It's what you got inside of yourself! It's you, don't you understand? Not anybody else!"

"Are you all through?" Fanny asked.

Ma clenched her hands together, in despair. "Oh—ain't there any way of drivin' sense into your head?"

Fanny spoke deliberately. "Not what you call sense. You think you know so much—you think you understand me. Well, you're all wrong. I wouldn't marry Ralph if I lived a thousand years. No, nor anybody else. Unless it was George. And he's gone. And don't think I'll ever forget it was you that wanted us to wait till he came back. And now he won't ever come back. And that's the last time I'm ever going to talk about it!"

Once more she turned away, with finality.

Ma drew a long breath. Then, decisively she said. "Well—I got to do it. I tried every other way. There's nothin' else for it. Come back here. I got to save you, if it makes you hate me all the rest of your life. Come here, now, and listen to me, Fanny Williams."

Fanny hesitated. She paused at the door, however, and came back. "All right, Ma," she said. "Get it over with."

Slowly, with emphasis, Ma spoke. "Suppose—suppose I was to prove to you that George was only foolin' you all the time!"

Fanny jumped back, with horror and incredulity.

"Wait a minute!" Ma continued, "And not only that, but he didn't ever mean to marry you!"

Fanny found her voice. "That's a lie. Are you crazy? A lie like that—why, he loved—"

Ma caught her up. "I don't mean to say he didn't love you—"

At that moment Fred stuck his head within the door. "Say—hurry up, will you? The eats are frozen—"

Ma cried, "Get out of here!"

Fred pulled his head out.

Ma, with trembling hand, flashed a letter from her apron pocket. "I never wanted to let you know about it. I tried every way to protect you. But—"

She held the letter out.

Fanny, aghast, took it. She saw the beloved handwriting, addressed to her mother. Like an automaton she pulled the sheets from the envelope. She sat upon the bed.

Ma, now that the deed was accomplished, made a gesture toward her daughter. Her face was furrowed with suffering. Her eyes were blinded with tears. But resolutely she groped her way to the door.

"I had to do it—"

Fanny did not hear her, immersed as she was in the letter.

Ma closed the door softly.

13

——, France,
August 12, 1918.

Dear Mrs. Williams,

Well Mrs. Williams you are right I am not the marrying kind. What a sap I would be to get tied down even to Fanny.

I would just leave her some time. There are too many girls in the world. I tried to be good but there is a sweet little Frog kid that I like and I might even marry her but I don't think so because you don't have to marry them. I am in a jamb here. They busted me because I got in a fight with one of those Sears Robuck lieuts not a Marine but I socked him plenty and I may get general court. That would be fierce because they have got the goods on me. But we go over the top again to-morrow, and I have got a plan. If you hear that I am killed don't be surprised. That will help things out all around. It will get me out of this jamb and Fanny will see in the papers that I am killed and you tell her I am and then she can forget me. I thought I loved her enough so I could marry her but I got cold feet even before I left. I knew a couple of weeks ahead we would probably get sent over so I stalled her. She is one sweet kid but there are other sweet kids. I am not good enough for her that is a fact. She ought to find somebody that is not so wise as me. She is too innocent. I would get tired of her. She should marry some body that would be a good provider not a wild man like me. Make it easy on her. And thank you for making me open my eyes. You are right I would be terrible for your little girl. And I guess I really dont love her enough.

Yours truly,
GEORGE CARY.

14

Ma sat, staring at her plate. She paid little attention to the tumult.

"Hey, Ma," Fred was calling, "How about some of the meat?"

"Oh, it's cold!" Zelda reproached him.

"That's all right! I'm cold, too! That makes it fifty-fifty. So let's all have a shot of this! How about you, Zelda?"

He gestured with the bottle.

Zelda shook her head.

"Come on, Harry," he continued, "You're way behind! Me old pal, Harry!" He addressed the assemblage. "Fought the battle of Camp Taylor, hey, Harry? Some bonus we get, hey, kid?"

Zelda giggled. "Fred! Do you get a bonus? I thought that was only for the soldiers."

"Haw, haw!" he roared, "One more crack like that, and we get you a job at the Orpheum!" He addressed the crowd again. "No, jokin' aside, the world sure is small. Here this bum—" indicating Harry, "I only found him again a month ago. I run short of smokes, and walkin' into a United States Cigar Store—"

"United Cigar Store, you dumb egg!" Harry interrupted.

"All right, have it your own way. Where was I?"

"You was pickin' up a cigar," said one of the anonymous young men.

"And I'll murder you," Fred continued, "Anyways, I pulled a good one. I says to the clerk, not noticin' who it was—and it was Harry all the time—'Gimme a pack of Humps,' I says, 'I walked my mile!' How's that? Pretty good?"

Harry spoke confidentially to Zelda, "You know, all the cuckoos ain't in clocks."

"Say, do you want a poke in the nose?" Fred queried, "Are you goin' to shut up and let me finish the story?"

Zelda said very innocently, "But Fred—we heard it before."

"Well, you can hear it again. So I ast him for a pack of Humps—"

"Aw, give it a rest!" Harry interrupted, "More gin, bartender!"

"Here!" said Fred, passing the bottle, "And I hope it kills you. Ma? How about a little gargle?"

"I don't want any," Ma said, looking toward the door, "And I do wish you wouldn't drink so much. It always makes you so silly."

"Aw—don't get that way, Ma!" Fred answered, "Anniversaries don't only come once a year." He rose, and began in a speech-making tone. "Ladies and gents, we're here to celebrate a grand occasion, what I mean. One year ago tonight, January the nineteenth, 1919—how's them for nineteens?—me and the little woman—" he gestured with his glass toward Zelda, "We stepped down the aisle and got hitched. Let's all drink to Zelda! Because from what she tells me, about a year from now we're goin' to step down the same aisle and watch 'em sprinkle water on Fred, Junior! Drink hearty!"

Zelda, all foolish confusion, tittered, "Oh Fred! You promised!" She hid her face.

"Yeay!" came a chorus of cheers.

"Let 'er go!" continued Fred, "Here's to us! Down the old sewer!"

They all drank.

Harry jumped to his feet. "Here's to all three of you! And may all your troubles be little ones!"

There was a howl of laughter and applause, during which Fred protested, "Go easy! Too much is enough!"

Then he made his way quickly around the table. "How about a little music?" he shouted. He snatched the picture of George and the flag from Fanny's Victrola, dumping them into a chair.

Ma protested sharply, "Fred! You leave that alone!"

"Aw, what's the diff'?" Fred yelled. He started it playing. The music of the "Sweetheart" song floated out.

Ma jumped to her feet, started toward the Victrola. "You turn that off, this second!"

Fred seized her with what he considered playfulness, and commenced waltzing her, singing, yelpingly, "Sweetheart, sweetheart, sweetheart!"

At this moment, the door to Fanny's room was flung open, and she entered. Her face was pale and set. Appalled by it, they fell into a complete hush.

All except Fred. Defiantly, he yelled, "Swell music, hey?"

One glance at Fanny's face, and Ma cried, "Fanny!"

Fanny confronted her. She spoke clearly, measuring her words. "Ma, I just want you to remember this. You can always think of it when you think of me. Everything in the world I ever loved, you ruined! You can just be proud of that!"

She turned toward the door. Ma rushed toward her. "Fanny—Fanny—wait—where—"

"What do you care?" Fanny answered. "Find out!"

"What are you goin' to do? Fanny—" Ma cried, stifled.

"What's that to you?" Fanny replied, with dreadful distinctness. She made her way toward the Victrola, brushing by Fred.

Ma pleaded. "Fanny—I—"

Fanny reached into the Victrola, and with a firm hand swept the needle across the face of the record. It screeched

like a hurt animal. In the shocked silence, she walked up to Fred, who stood, amazed, his mouth open.

She slapped him stingingly with her open palm.

"Fanny—come back—I—" Ma screamed.

But Fanny was already through the door.

"Your coat—" Ma called despairingly, "In all this snow—"

She tottered toward the door, which Fanny slammed in her face.

Fred caught her, pulled her back toward her chair, into which she collapsed, haggard and hopeless.

With an awful attempt to collect the fragments of the party, he yelled, jocularly, "Aw, to Hell with her! Eat, drink and be merry. . . ."

Part Five

I

MAGNUS SAT SLOUCHED in front of a brisk wood-fire in the Van Zant sitting room. He was glancing over the evening paper. He looked up casually as Bevis said, "Sir."

"It's eight-twenty, sir," Bevis went on, having caught his attention, "And Mr. James expects you at nine."

"Oh, the hell with Jim," Magnus growled, not, however with animus, and went on reading the paper.

"I've laid out your dinner-jacket," Bevis remarked.

"Huh?" Magnus said, absently. Then, looking up once more, he said, "Oh, yes. That's right. You wanted to go over to the Montauk, didn't you. Well, go on. I won't need you any more."

"Thank you, sir," Bevis said, and started away. He halted and came back. "That's the last of the Scotch, sir. There's only half a bottle."

"I suppose you've been in it," Magnus commented, turning a page. "Oh, well, don't worry. We'll be where there's plenty in a few days. I'll remember to borrow a couple from Jim, though."

"The packing's nearly finished, sir. I couldn't find your tan golf shoes."

"Whose fault is that?" Magnus glowered, good-humoredly, "All right, I'll buy a new pair down there, and take 'em off your wages. Now, go on, pop out, or you'll miss half the show."

Bevis withdrew. Magnus went back to his reading. The phone rang. He answered.

"Hello. Hello, Jim. Yep. Oh, get somebody else, can't you? Get old Major Simmons. It's a rotten night out. . . . Yes, but a few steps is a few steps, and I'm fed up on bridge. . . . What? I know I did, but . . . Oh, hell, yes. All right. I'll be there by nine. By the way, I'm short of Scotch. Yes. That's some inducement, anyhow. Good-by."

He yawned, teetered several times on his heels, and walked toward his bedroom, which was just off the sitting-room. There, he began systematically to change his clothes. He shaved. As he shaved, he sang, lustily, not badly out of key, an army song he had picked up from an American lieutenant during the war—his favorite shaving-song.

It began,

"Where are all the Generals?
I know where they are.
I know where they are, yes,
I know where they are—"

It told, in no complimentary terms, the lecherous, evasive habits of generals. Colonels were then discussed, then Majors, and on down the ranks and grades the entire army system was revealed as increasing in worth and decreasing in privilege.

"I saw them, I saw them
Climbing up the God-damned hill,
I saw them,
Climbing up the God-damned hill!"

He asseverated, in tribute to sergeants. The sharp ring of the doorbell smote his ear.

"Bevis!" he yelled, automatically, and scratched himself just below the nose. He swore, and dabbed at the wound, commencing at the same time the climactic pæan concerning Privates. It was a ridiculous game. He always raced his shaving against the song. If the song finished first, he lost. The penalty for losing was smoking one less cigar. But there was also the added uncomfortable feeling of having lost, which pursued him for hours afterwards. He did not like to lose. He therefore drew out the lines to abnormal lengths—this was considered doubtful tactics, but allowable—and shaved more rapidly.

"—Where are all the Privates?
I know where they are.
Up to their knees in—"

He omitted the material in which the privates were immersed to their knees, not from any over-niceness, but because the bell was ringing again, desperately, a long ring.

"Bevis!" he howled, then remembered. Bevis was not in.

Hastily he slung on a silk bath-robe, and swearing softly, he dashed to the door. Who the devil was it, anyhow? Well, they'd have to take him as he was.

He flung the door open.

Then he stepped back, with a snort of surprise.

There, her eyes large with excitement, and her face ashen, stood Fanny.

"I'm—" she began, quaveringly. Then her voice hardened. "I'm here!" she finished, defiantly.

"Well—come in, come in!" he cried, holding out his hand, and pulling her inside, "Why—where's your coat? Here, stand in front of the fire. You must be frozen. Isn't it snowing?"

"Yes," she said.

"Stand there and dry yourself. I'll be back in a minute. I was in the midst of shaving. Lucky you caught me. Make yourself at home, now."

He hurried back to the bathroom.

2

He found Fanny wheeling in front of the fire. Its warmth checked the shivers which from time to time ran over her. Her eyes shone with a diamond-like brilliancy. The color had come back into her face, and her cheeks glowed, feverishly. Her whole appearance was so altered from the shy, modest person he was used to, that he peered at her, incredulous, and constrained.

"Well, well," he said, not coming very close to her, "So—you've changed your mind."

Her voice was metallic, as she answered, immediately, "No. I didn't change it. I had it changed for me." She uttered a bitter half-laugh.

"Something rather terrible must have happened to you."

"Oh, yes. It was terrible enough, I guess. Only it happened a long time ago. When I was born."

He drew nearer to her, and gravely said, "Why, Fanny!"

She laughed again, with eyes narrowed. "Sure. I was born a fool, that's all. And I've been a fool all my life. But I waked up, to-day. Yes, I waked up, all right!"

He put his hand softly on her arm. "Wait a minute, wait a minute, my child. Don't call yourself names—"

"Names! The truth isn't any name! Just a blind, silly fool! Oh, yes! I thought I knew so much. I thought I could tell what was right and what was wrong! I had a lot of nutty dreams, and I tried to live up to them. And all the time I was just being a fool, and everybody was laughing at me. They knew!"

"Now, look here, Fanny. You mustn't carry on this way—"

She broke away from his grasp, and stood defiant, her voice harsh. "Katie was right! Be good—what does it get you! Try to do right—don't make me laugh! Love somebody, and put him on a pedestal, and worship him—and you find out! But I'm cured, all right! I'm cured!" Her tones mocked herself. "Pure! I was so good and pure!" Once more the hysterical laugh, that rang in his ears like the striking of steel. "Just a fool!"

"Why—why, sit down," he said, uncertainly, "Why—I don't know what to make of you."

"Don't you?" she said, shrilly, looking at him provocatively, "I thought you did! I thought that was what you were talking about so much the other night! Well, pardon me. Maybe I'm in the wrong house!"

"Stop that, Fanny!" he ordered, "You're talking like somebody crazy!"

"Crazy? Don't you believe it! I never had any sense till now. 'Be good and you'll be happy'—is *that* so! Fanny-the-good-girl! Turned you down, because I was trying to

be true to something. Thing—that's the name for it. The man I loved, see? He was a hero, he was killed, fighting for his country. Oh, yes. And I was being true to his memory. That's a good one—huh! Two years, nearly. And all the time, they knew. So they said, 'We'll wake her up.' They did, all right! I'm waked!"

He began to understand. Pity and sympathy were in his tones, as he said, "Fanny! Why, you poor baby—"

She backed away from him. "Oh, no! Never mind the 'poor baby' stuff. Fanny the fool! Believed in him, loved him —and all the time he was just a dirty liar! Laughing at me! Safe somewhere, with some rotten French woman, getting a good laugh about Fanny, the pure little goody-goody! And all the time, life going along, and passing by me, and me shutting myself off from it. Missing everything beautiful, everything I wanted—and all for that skunk!"

He winced. All the magic of her sweetness, her dainty aloofness—where had it vanished? Now, she was like hundreds of other girls he had seen. Beautiful, glowing, indeed. But brittle, enameled—and bereft of individuality.

A cold rage began to mount in him. Had he allowed himself to waste time, thoughts, affection upon someone he had considered flowerlike, tender, shyly sweet, only to find that, in the face of a crisis, she was only an enameled little slut? No, no. The blow she had received had knocked her senses from her. This was all a bluff, all a desperate sham.

"Fanny—Fanny! Pull yourself together! I know it's hurt you awfully—but you mustn't go all to pieces like this!"

She came close to him, determined, brazen. She looked up into his face with eyes that glittered.

"You wanted me," she said, distinctly, "Well—here I am!"

He seized her elbows, gripped them so that his nails went into the soft flesh.

"Was it you? Was it you?" he said, slowly.

She did not flinch.

In that moment, he was minded to strike her, to clench his fist and smash it into the face which was making a mocking parody of the sweet child he had so desired.

But the telephone bell jangled.

He pushed her away from him, abruptly, walked swiftly away, and, his back toward her, answered it.

"Hello. Yes, Jim. I'm terribly sorry. I was just about to call you. Well, look here." He talked in a tone too low for her to hear.

She stood bewildered. Was this, too, to be a failure? What was wrong? All her convictions, all her ideals she had crushed, thrown to the winds, in her pain and fury. She had come to him. What more did he want?

Her courage was ebbing. She spied the bottle of Scotch on the tabouret. Quickly she poured out a large drink, choked it down. It tore at her throat.

"Yes, I know," Magnus was saying into the receiver, "But I'm sure the Major will come. Don't be angry, old chap. You see, Delehanty's at the Biltmore, and he leaves on the midnight for the South, and this matter is horribly important, so . . . Yes, yes, old boy. Thanks so much. I'll do the same for you some time. Good-by."

He turned, to see her valiantly finishing another drink. In two strides he was at her side; he slapped the glass from her hand, and, seizing her shoulders, shook her; shook her as if he would dislocate her joints.

"You damned little fool!" he yelled.

Suddenly he threw her away from him. She fell into a huge arm-chair.

All her brazenness, all her forced courage deserted her. She sobbed, cowering in the chair, her face hidden in her arm.

He stood gazing at her, coldly. His hand reached for the Scotch. He stooped, and picked up the glass. His hand shook, as he drank.

And all at once his anger deserted him. She was so fragile, so pitiful. In that moment the Fanny he loved had come back, and was crumpled there, needing him, his sympathy, his kindness, his comfort.

He knelt beside her.

"Fanny!" he called softly, "Fanny! My dearest child!"

She pressed her face closer into the harsh stuff of the chair.

With infinite care, he lifted her, and carried her to a rocker beside the hearth. He sat down, cradling her in his arms. Her cheek lay against his shoulder. He rocked, humming under his breath a tuneless little song.

Gradually the frenzy of her weeping died down. Presently it ceased.

The minutes passed.

He hummed, and rocked.

3

After a while he felt her head stir. He looked down at her. She was smiling ruefully up, her long lashes glistening.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He smiled back at her. "Forget about it. It's all right now, isn't it?"

She nodded, slowly. He stroked her with his fingers.

"Poor little girl," he said, after a moment. "Did all her castles come tumbling down, and did her hero turn out to be just a man, after all?"

She gulped.

"And did she say to herself, 'I'm going to be a bad, bad woman!' and try to pretend she was as hard as nails?"

Fanny once more hid her face in his lapel.

He chuckled. "But lucky for her, Old Man Magnus didn't want that kind of a girl—wouldn't have one around the place. And he knew she was just trying to act, and all the while she was the sweet, lovable girl he'd been getting to know. So he knocked the silly ideas out of her head, didn't he? And she isn't going to try any such ridiculous games any more, is she?"

Fanny looked up at him, then burrowed.

"And she's going to wipe it all out of her mind—all the disappointment, and all the hurt, and all the things she had to put up with before," he continued, "And it's going to be a whole new life. Clean slate. Happiness."

She sighed. The warmth of the fire, the whisky, the protection of his arms were lulling her, muddling her thoughts. The impression persisted that somehow, inexplicably, she had found, in her trouble, her father. The aroma of whisky and tobacco, the peace, the comfort, and his "story-telling voice," droning now so agreeably, enhanced the feeling. She closed her eyes, and abandoned her weary mind to it.

"Adventure!" he was saying, "We'll be a couple of adventurers on our way to the Spanish Main! Down out of

Winter, into the middle of May! The blue Caribbean, where the pirates used to roam. But they can't get us, because they're only ghosts, and ghosts can't do much against a big white ship like ours. Nothing to do but be lazy, and forget everything. We'll lie out in our deck-chairs, and let the sun pour over us, and watch the blue water. Blue—you never saw such blue. Unless you ever took a good look at your own eyes. And porpoises play along the bow, and flying-fish dance across the waves, and—"

"Whales?" suggested Fanny, in a voice so much that of a little girl listening to an adult's tale that Magnus looked sharply down at her, and grinned.

"Whales if you want. We'll have a shipment made for you. And then, suddenly one day you'll see something like a big back-bone sticking out of the sea, and that'll be the Matanzas Mountains. And pretty soon you'll see it's a tremendous piece of land—Cuba!"

"Cuba," she echoed.

"You'll be coming close to the harbor—and I won't tell you much about that harbor. I want it to hit you right between the eyes, and hear what you'll say. You'll be looking down at the water, and it'll be still the blue Caribbean, and all of a sudden, you'll see something. As if a knife had cut a slice. And the water on the other side of the slice will be green, green as a cat's eyes. It's the queerest thing in the world." He paused, remembering it, and smiling.

"And that's Havana," he went on, "And there's Morro castle, that rugged fort there. And back of it, Cabanas, the other fort. We'll go and see Morro, and I'll show you where the Spaniards used to throw the bodies of the poor Cubans. You know, the Spaniards treated them terribly. They'd put them in there as prisoners, and every now and then one

would disappear, especially if he was dangerous. Down he'd go, still alive, through a chute cut out of the rocks, hundreds of feet into the water. He never had a chance, not a chance. If he lived till he hit the water, the sharks would get him."

"Sharks!" she shivered, sleepily.

"Oh, yes. A great many sharks. But they have protected places for bathers. We'll swim. Have you a pretty bathing-suit?"

"No. Not very," she murmured.

"Never mind, we'll get you the prettiest in Havana. And we'll go to theaters, and dance at the country-club and the hotels—they have wonderful hotels—and the theaters, the Chinese shows, and the Spanish ones, and the opera. And the warm, sweet-smelling nights, and the wind of the tropics! And perhaps they'll have a bull fight. Would you like to see a bull-fight?"

"Hunh-uh!"

"Well, you won't have to, if you don't want to. You can spend that day in the shops, and I'll go to the bull-fight. Wonderful shops! As good as Paris, some of them. Think of it, all the clothes you want, anything your heart desires. You pick 'em out, that's all you have to do. And then, when we get you fitted out properly, we'll go on the Prado. That's the great avenue, where all the swells parade. Everybody takes a siesta after lunch. Know what a siesta is?"

He felt her head shake slightly.

He chuckled. "It's what you're about to do now, I believe. A bit of shut-eye. But four o'clock—that's the time they all come out. All the beautiful women, and the handsome men, and they make a regular fashion parade of it. Some of them walk, and a lot of the old families ride up and down in their

barouches. Oh, it's quaint, and beautiful. I don't suppose you ever saw a barouche, did you?"

This time, she did not answer at all.

He laughed softly. "Darling," he said, "You've never even imagined the fun you're going to have. And me, too. You'll be Cinderella. Make a bluff for a little while every morning being secretary, and then, in the afternoon and evening, magic change into the Princess. Only there won't be any twelve o'clock, with the coachmen turning into mice, and the coach into a pumpkin. Just one long lark, that's what it will be, for both of us. You'll see."

He felt her breathing regularly and peacefully. He was so good to her, so gentle, so kind! All her troubles vanished, smoothed away.

Dimly, upon the border of sleep, she was conscious of someone bending over her, nearer, nearer. . . .

(The sleeping princess, waiting, waiting. . . .)

"Fanny! My Fanny!" the low whisper trembled. . . .

Hands upon her body, hands that thrilled and burned. . . .

(My lover, . . . my knight . . . upon a milk-white steed he clattered through the castle gates . . . at last, at last . . . my knight . . .)

Lips against her lips, crushing bruising. . . .

(Take me, my lover, my knight! . . .)

Her arms went about his neck, holding him, straining him closer. Her eyes half-opened, languorous. . . .

The patch of silver, above his temple. . . .

("Go to sleep, Fan-tan"— . . . story . . . Pa! It's Pa!)

"No! . . . No!"

She struggled, her eyes ablaze with horror.

(Pa's hands! . . . Pa's lips! . . . Oh, God! What have I almost done! . . .)

"No! No!" she screamed. She beat upon that face. She tore at it with her nails.

He started back, dumbfounded.

(I've got to get out! I've got to get away! My own Pa!—)

Now she stood upright, staring, in a palsy of terror.

"No-no-no . . . no-no-no-no!" she moaned, in a gibberish.

Aghast, he stood frozen.

"Jesus—Christ!" he said, aloud. "She's going crazy!—"

(Run! Run—now—anywhere—was going to do that . . . with him— Oh . . . oh—)

She backed slowly away from him, fixing him with her mad eyes.

"No-no-no-no! No-no-no-no-no!" the rapid gibberish poured from her mouth, higher gasping. . . .

He wrenched himself from his apathy, made a step toward her. . . .

She shrieked.

She turned, dashed through the doorway.

Across the great room, moaning, she ran. Then down the stairs, and out, into the blizzard.

He stood at the top of the stairs, gaping.

"For God's sake! For God's *sake!*" he repeated, loudly, "For God's sake. . . ."

Part Six

1

KATIE, RETURNING FROM the movies with her swain some twenty minutes later, found Fanny crumpled across the doormat.

"Pick her up, can't you, you poor dumb fish? She's passed out, can't you see that? Gosh, she's soaked through! Lift her, lift her, you big bum! . . ."

2

Pneumonia.

Ma arrived at once, in response to Katie's call. She asked no questions. She simply took charge, silent, efficient. When the doctor suggested a trained nurse, she asked him bluntly, "Are you crazy?" He abandoned the suggestion.

Fanny went rapidly into a delirium. During long days and nights Ma nursed her, snatching sleep on a small cot. Katie fetched clothes and other belongings.

She also brought news from the office that Fanny wasn't to worry about her job. The boss had told her that Fanny's pay was to go on just the same, until she could return.

She kept to herself her wonder over a brief encounter she had undergone with the Canadian Magnus. That gentleman had shown up only once more at the office before departing for Cuba. About noon of the day after Fanny's col-

lapse, he called Katie into his office, and spoke immediately.

"I understand Miss Williams is ill at your house."

"Yes, sir," said Katie, briefly, studying him.

"Is she very ill?"

"She's got the pneumonia."

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, sincerely, "I wish there was something I could do for her."

"I don't guess there's anything," Katie said, and glanced at him sharply. "Maybe when she's better she'll need a nice trip somewheres."

She watched for some sign in his face at that remark. He remained imperturbable.

"That's a good idea," he said, steadily, "I'll suggest it to my brother. Say good-by to her for me. She was a splendid worker."

"Yeh?" Katie said, with a slight smile. "All right. I'll tell her. But she's a darn sick girl."

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, "And I do hope she makes a quick recovery. By the way, what's your address?"

Katie told him.

"Thank you," he said. Then opened his newspaper.

Katie longed to put leading questions to him. But "Fat chance," she thought, "That wise old bird! He knows somethin', that's a cinch. But try and find out."

He did not look up as she left the office.

After lunch, she resolved to go in again, and attempt some sort of approach. But he did not return. Saturday she heard that he had sailed.

On Tuesday, an enormous box of assorted flowers arrived: a card was enclosed.

"Hope you're well enough by this time to find some pleasure in these. Get well soon."

It was signed, *"Magnus."*

As Fanny was just then at the height of her delirium, Katie sniffed.

She placed the flowers in various pitchers, glasses and a vase, about the room.

"The boss sure spread himself," she remarked to Ma. ("Magnus"—lucky he hadn't put in his initials.)

"He must be a very fine man," said Ma, smiling wearily. "Do you s'pose I'll have to send him a note?"

"Oh, no—don't you bother," Katie answered, hastily. "I'll thank him for you. He'll know you're all tuckered out."

Two days later, she intercepted another box of flowers, less splendid in quantity and quality. This one was really from J. G.

"Gosh," she said to herself, "And different hand-writin'! Good thing I grabbed 'em."

She explained to Ma that they were from Fanny's fellow-employees.

Ma accepted the explanation, asking Katie again to express her thanks.

Much graver matters filled her attention. For Fanny was approaching the crisis.

3

Fanny tossed, muttered, whimpered, cried out. Often she talked with George. Sometimes she spoke the word "Pa,"

but seldom were there understandable sentences surrounding it. And the tone was so troubled that the old woman, sitting vigilant, flinched, and wondered.

On this crucial night, the girl's ravings were incoherent beyond understanding. The sentences came fast, tumbled one upon another, half-words, muffled.

Toward two o'clock, she suddenly sat upright, and, pointing a finger straight at Ma, said in a clear voice, "You ruined everything I ever loved! I hope you're satisfied."

Ma, with a little groan, cried, "Fanny! Don't say that—don't!" She ran to her daughter's side.

Then she realized that it was part of the delirium. For already Fanny was rambling again. Something about "—the blue Carribbean."

"Lay down, Fanny, that's a good girl," the mother said, soothing desperately, and attempting to push the girl gently back upon the pillow.

But, at the touch of her hands, Fanny screamed and cowered.

"No! No! Not you! Not you! Not you!"

She shrieked, and fell back.

Ma, bending over her, frantic, could detect no movement. An awful fear clutching her heart, she stumbled to the telephone, and called the doctor.

When she returned to the bed-side, Katie was standing, looking down at her friend, smiling with relief.

Fanny was breathing regularly, deeply.

Ma, with a little cry of thankfulness, knelt beside her. She rested her head upon the counterpane.

When the doctor arrived, he needed only a brief examination. Fanny slept on.

"Well, the fever's broken," he whispered. "You've pulled

her through, Mrs. Williams. Better get a little sleep yourself."

4

Three afternoons later, Fanny spoke rationally for the first time. She had been lying quiet, watching Ma, who sat by the window, looking wearily out it. The old head nodded forward, and Ma waked with a jerk, rubbing her eyes.

"How long have I been sick, Ma?" Fanny's voice came, feebly.

The woman arose, and hastened toward her. "Never mind," she said. "You're not to talk."

But Fanny fretfully repeated, "How long?"

"Two weeks. Now hush."

"Was I out of my head?"

"Now don't talk, Fanny. Just lay there."

"But I want to know. Was I?"

"Some."

"Did I—did I say anything? Honest, now, Ma."

Ma put all her powers of being convincing into her answer. "Nothin' anybody could make sense out of."

Fanny studied her mother's face. It was inscrutable. She closed her eyes. She knew that she would never discover how much information Ma had gathered. Ma was like that. Such a mixture of kindness and meanness. And always that

wall between them. As much Ma's fault as her own. But Ma tried to do what was right. Always. Nobody could deny it. Even when she saw wrong. But when did she see wrong? Hadn't she been pretty much right, all along? Oh, well—too tired to figure things out, now. Too tired, too tired. But Ma had pulled her through. Ma was pretty wonderful.

"Ma," she said again, after a while.

Ma turned in the chair where she was once more sitting.

"Thanks, Ma."

Ma said nothing. But over her face flooded suddenly a gratitude, an affection that dazzled the girl. For that moment the wall was down. It was as if for the first time their souls stood naked, unafraid, touching one another.

Then the moment passed.

(You mustn't give in too much. She'll dominate you, she'll rule you. And you have to live your own life, after all.)

She turned her eyes away.

When she looked back, the glory had faded. Ma was inscrutable, baffling and baffled as ever.

Fanny, with a sigh, turned on her side, and drifted into a doze.

5

The days marched slowly by. Fanny gained in physical strength.

She was able to chat with Katie for short intervals. What was going on at the office? How were all the girls? How was Katie's boy-friend? What a shame it was to make a hospital out of Katie's flat.

"You want a punch in the nose?" Katie replied to the last remark, "First time I had comp'ny in years."

Nothing about Magnus.

"Your Ma's a great sketch, Fan."

"I know."

"Sure is some nurse. Say, all them days and nights—wonder what she uses instead of sleep."

"Yes."

"She's pretty fond of you, Fan. Sour as lemons, but—you know what I mean."

"She saved me, all right."

"You're darned tootin'!"

After Katie had gone, Fanny resolved to try once more to thank Ma adequately. But even as she struggled with the possibility of talking straight out to her mother, the torturing whirl of her thoughts began.

(Thank her . . . what for? . . . Why shouldn't she let me die, and get it over with? . . . Now I have to go back. . . . Back to the office, oh, God! . . . I'll see him there. . . . It'll drive me crazy . . . even if he's not there, the desk, his office. . . . I couldn't stand it, I couldn't stand it. . . . I can't go back . . . what am I going to do? . . . What's going to become of me? . . . Everything's gone . . . everything. . . . I have nobody now, nobody . . . and Ma was right . . . I've got to start all over. . . . Oh, why didn't she let me die—)

6

Beyond a certain point, Fanny did not improve. She remained listless, sad, developed little appetite.

"I don't believe she wants to get well!" Ma said one day to Katie.

"Oh, sure she does," Katie said, but without conviction.

"Did you notice the way that line is growin' between her eyes? She frowns all the time. And it ain't frownin', exactly. It's like she was sufferin'."

"Yeh," Katie admitted, "She does frown a lot."

"And her eyes, Katie. They're the sickest part of her. And when she's asleep, she jumps around all the time, and makes noises."

"Aw, I think she's all right. It takes a lot of gettin' well, Mrs. Williams."

Ma was silent for a moment. Finally, "Listen here. I got an idear. Now, if I say anything, it'll just spoil it. Suppose you spring it on her."

That evening, after Fanny had forced down only a few spoonfuls of broth, and nibbled at a slice of toast, she lay staring at the ceiling. The thoughts were taking up their customary whirl. The furrow between her brows was set.

Then, very softly from the other room floated music. Notes from a violin. She recognized the melody. "Traumerei."

Gently it came, stealing in like a benediction. She closed

her eyes. The whirlpool of thoughts slowed. A deep peace descended upon her. The melody went on. And now it was as if little hands were touching her, smoothing her.

Her mind became a beautiful void. The tune ceased. Another began, sweetly sad.

She did not recognize. She did not try. The music flowed over her, laving her weary brain, washing it clean.

She opened her eyes, after a while.

Ralph stood beside the bed, devotion shining in his countenance.

"Fanny, dearest," he said.

"It was lovely," she murmured, smiling. She opened her hand weakly. He placed his own hand within it. She closed her fingers. She drifted off into a calm sleep.

7

Fanny's recovery accelerated. Every evening Ralph came with his violin, although sometimes he did not play it. Ma discreetly retired, always, lest her presence interfere. Often, Katie sat with them, kidding him, laughing, drawing him out. He was always ready to give details of his progress at the store. Things were moving briskly. He had numerous ideas concerned with putting pep into piano sales, with attractive window-displays of instruments and sheet music.

One evening he arrived, flushed with victory. He had outfitted five members of Jameson's Jazz-hounds—Jameson's! Columbia records!

"It was Jameson himself did it! Why, you see, he was in the subway, and this guy had a clarinet-case, and I started talking about instruments, and the guy got interested, and he dropped in at the store, and tried some of 'em, and I gave him *some* fast line, and then he said he was Jameson, and he sent some of his boys around, and they got two tenor saxes, and a bass clarinet, and a new set of bells, and—can you beat it?—even a bassoon! Likes 'em better than Conn's! And maybe he won't tell the other band-leaders! Some start for the *important* business! And—and—"

Fanny found herself excited, warmed with pride over his success. As he rattled on, so pleased, so confident, she was filled with a happiness altogether startling to her. She hadn't realized how much Ralph and his affairs were beginning to mean to her.

When he was leaving, she said, "I'm proud of you, Ralph! I'm just proud of you!"

"Aw, shut up!" he blurted, ecstatically, "It's you that does it."

"Me?"

"Sure! Why, just seeing you gives me pep!"

When he had gone, she pondered about him until long after her hour for sleeping.

8

For a week following, he did not come over. He phoned, informing her that he had caught a slight cold, and did not

want to risk conveying any of it to her. She, through Ma, insisted that he was silly. But he was firm, and would not return until he was completely over it. He called her daily.

The first evening of his absence she was quiet and depressed. The second, she was anxious and restless. Toward the end of the week, she openly fretted.

Ma observed, but withheld comment. Out of Fanny's sight, she grinned delightedly.

Fanny had just been saying, "Oh, what does he have to be so stupid for? I can't catch anything now." She detected the remains of one of Ma's grins.

And, with never a word, she grinned back.

"Come here, Ma," she said.

Ma came near, puzzled.

"Give me your hand a second," Fanny ordered.

She held the calloused hand, looking at it. Then, unexpectedly, she gripped it firmly, and with the gesture of a business-man greeting a Rotarian acquaintance, she shook it once, firmly.

"Shake!" she said.

Ma did not dare ask what she meant. But hope leaped in her breast, as she walked away.

9

Late Sunday afternoon, Ralph entered the room. He found Fanny propped up with pillows.

"Well, Ralph. You sure you're all pure and well?" she asked, with a tinge of sarcasm.

"Don't bawl me out," he said, slightly aggrieved.

"I will, too," she answered. She looked at Ma. "Would you mind leaving me with my best beau?"

Ma strove to hide her delight, and went out, growling.

"Did you bring your fiddle?" Fanny said.

"Sure," he said, eagerly, holding it out.

"Well, put it down. Sit on the bed. Go on, sit. I'm not going to bite you."

Gingerly he sat down.

"Let me look at you. Turn your face around. Now the other way." She studied him, as he bewilderedly made the motions she desired. "Well," she said at length, "You're nothing to rave about. Still—"

She smiled. Then the smile vanished, and she bent forward, seriously.

"Ralph. Remember what you said the—the day I got sick?"

He flushed. "Aw, listen—I—never mind that."

"Oh, didn't you mean it?"

"Why—you know damn well I meant it. But what's the use of going into that?"

"Oh—it's all over now, is it?"

He looked away from her, unhappily.

"You've been very good," she went on, "You promised you wouldn't say anything about it any more, and you've kept your promise. I just wanted to tell you I appreciate it."

"Thanks," he muttered, ironically.

"I suppose you do love me still," she said, lightly.

He looked at her miserably.

"Well—I'm sorry to say I still don't love you—that way, anyhow."

"Well—you don't have to tell me again!" he burst out.

"I just wanted to be sure you understood," she replied.

"Well—I do. So will you for God's sake quit?"

She looked down at the coverlet. "And you understand why? I mean, why I don't—that way?"

"If this is all you got to say—" he made a motion preparatory to getting up from the bed.

"I think you better listen. Honestly I do," she continued, "You know, I've had time to think about a lot of things, and I've been thinking I didn't explain enough—before."

"Never mind. You did, all right."

"You remember I told you there are two kinds of men, as far as I'm concerned—the ones like George—" she said the name steadily, "And all the others."

"Don't worry," he said, glumly, "I didn't forget that."

"And I told you that you weren't the kind that—that thrilled me, and made me go—crazy, sort of."

"Fanny!" he said, climbing down from the bed, "I ain't going to listen. I don't see how you can be so mean to me! I've acted decent—I've tried to be your friend, haven't I?"

"Well, I'm trying to tell you how much I appreciate it—you just being a friend. It's been wonderful!"

"You don't need to pick out that way to tell me," he said, and turned toward the windows.

"Oh, all right," she said, indifferently.

There was a silence, during which he continued staring out.

"I suppose they told you about George's letter," she remarked, quite as if they were speaking about the weather.

"Fred did," he muttered.

"Yes, I can imagine he did. It must have been a funny story."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I made a fool of myself all right," she went on, impersonally. "That's what you get for—for imagining things. I was looking for something, and I was bound I was going to find it. And I was bound George was it."

He shrugged again.

"I can talk to you about it, can't I, Ralph? After all, you're the only friend I have. The only one. And I do want to talk about it so much."

"Go ahead," he said, without turning. "I guess I can stand it."

"George wasn't it, was he! No, he wasn't. Do you think I'll ever find it? Do you, Ralph?"

"How do I know?" he said, in deep gloom.

She was silent a moment.

"I guess it's just a dream. Maybe I'll find it some day." She sighed. "And it won't be good for me at all."

She plucked the coverlet.

"I've got a lot of years to go, Ralph. I want you for my friend."

"Well—you got me," he said, huskily.

"But you said you were going away, and never see me any more."

"I was—I was lying," he faltered.

"And you mean to say you'll stay by me, always—just a friend?"

"Yep," he replied, his back still turned.

"And do things for me, and love me, even though I was only just a friend?"

"Yep," he repeated, lower.

"That wouldn't be fair! I wouldn't stand for it!"

"Oh, for God's sake!" he said, bitterly. "Are you going

to make me go away? Who the hell said anything about fair?"

"It wouldn't be fair!" she repeated, firmly, "Of course I couldn't let you be as fine to me as that unless I married you."

He turned toward her. "Aw, Fanny, can't you lay off that stuff till you're better?"

"I'm well enough. I know what I'm doing. I say, I couldn't let you be that fine to me, unless I was married to you. And I told you before, I don't love you—that way."

"Shut up!" he ordered. "If you don't shut up, I'll get out, right now." He made a step toward the door.

"But—" she raised her voice a little, "I've been thinking—you never know what you can do till you try."

"Huh?" he ejaculated, wheeling.

"I was thinking—I might try."

"Fanny!" he shouted, bounding toward her, "Do you mean—"

"I just said, 'Try'!" she cried, hastily, "I don't love you now, I—"

But he was upon his knees beside her, his arms around her.

"I'll scream!" she giggled.

"Fanny! Fanny!" he breathed, his face upon her breast.

She raised her voice in mock-fright.

"Ma!"

10

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here. . . ."

(So this is it. And suppose it was George . . . all those years ago . . . and by this time I'd . . . but it wouldn't have been, ever. What am I thinking about? He never meant to . . . never, not unless . . . but Ma certainly did interfere . . . and if she hadn't, maybe . . . and he'd be off to God knows where, with some woman or other . . . it's best this way, it's best, it's best. . . .)

"I require and charge you both . . ."

(And he's a darling, he *is* a darling. So sweet and kind, and everything I ask . . . just a boy. . . . I'll have to help him . . . that'll be fun . . . make him boss me, now and then . . . "hen-pecked"—nobody's going to say that . . . he looks really handsome—not wild, of course, but nice. . . .)

"Wilt thou have this Woman to thy. . . ."

(I wonder if he could really learn to be a great violinist. I'll make him keep at it. Of course, he's getting along in his work, and he won't have much time. . . .)

"Wilt thou have this Man to thy wedded . . ."

(I must pay attention . . . "love, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health" . . . the words are beautiful, beautiful. . . .)

"I will."

"I, Ralph . . ."

"I, Ralph . . ."

(He will, the lamb. He's much too good for me. Some ways, I mean. I wonder if he really understands. But I'll try, I'll try!)

"I, Frances . . ."

"I, Frances . . ."

"With this ring I thee wed . . ."

"With this ring I thee wed . . ."

(Poor dear . . . he's choking over it . . . he does love me so . . . and I'll try . . . Help me, God, help me try! . . .)

"Our Father . . ."

(It's almost done, now. Oh, not what I hoped for, not what I dreamed. But it's all right. It's going to be all right . . . the drawbridge crashed, the knight sprang from his milk-white steed . . . no, no! . . . Forget all that, forever and ever. . . . But can I? . . . I must! That's part of the trying. He'll make me happy, and I'll forget . . . Mr. Magnus—oh God! . . . Lonely, I've been so lonely, but not any more . . . I searched, and all I ever found was trouble and pain. . . . Now, peace, and care, and sweetness . . . and when the moon is shining, and far off I hear the hoof-beats clattering in the court-yard, I'll close my ears, I'll shut my mind. . . .)

"Forasmuch as Ralph and Frances . . ."

(Right, Ma, always right . . . I can't give in, and tell you, but you understand. . . . Yes, you understand. . . . I'd like to break down the wall, Ma . . . but . . maybe it isn't necessary. . . .)

"God the Father, God the Son, . . ."

(You see how it was, Pa, don't you? There couldn't be anybody like you, see? So . . .)

"Amen."

(Dear Ralph! I'll try . . .)

Epilogue

EPILOGUE

ON AN AUTUMN evening, six years later, Fanny opened the door of her apartment at 68 Montague Street, Brooklyn, and admitted George Cary.

The day before, Ma had called up hurriedly, to say that somebody had phoned the old flat, and asked for "Fanny." Unfortunately, Fred had answered, and with his usual stupidity, had vouchsafed full information, including Fanny's married name, address and telephone number, before ascertaining the identity of the caller; whereupon "the party" rang off, and Fred, at last slightly perturbed, had informed his mother of the incident.

"It sounds pretty fishy to me," Ma had finished, "And I certainly am furious at Fred. But then—that's just like him."

"It's all right, Ma. I'm sure it isn't anything to worry about," Fanny had said, concluding the conversation.

And she had smiled, uneasily, hanging up the receiver. Because "the party" had obviously wasted no time, but had already talked to Fanny herself, beginning with a "bet you can't guess who this is," and ending with a request to be allowed a visit, "just to say hello."

Fanny, without hesitation, had answered, coldly, that she had no desire to see him. Whereupon George had insisted, "I'm comin', anyways," and the operator's "Waiting?" had been the next word Fanny heard.

At first, Fanny had resolved to be absent when George put in his appearance. But she knew George—didn't she!

He would persist. He might make a nuisance of himself. Better to get it over with.

It had been with a mixture of curiosity, excitement and perturbation that she had prepared for the ordeal of seeing him again after so many years. What would he be like? What effect would he have upon her? Would she find him the romantic figure he had always been—was, even now, despite all the bitterness he had caused her? And what would she say to him? Well, she could relieve her mind of several remarks she had stored up. There was that.

With determined calmness she had gone about preparing for the meeting. Thursday—Emma's day off. That meant little Sue would have to be attended to. So much the better. Sue would make an added protection. "Protection! What against?" Fanny had said aloud. She had thought of calling Katie. But why? Did she need aid? Was she not strong enough to withstand George's charm?

Ralph would eat over in Manhattan, as usual on Thursdays, when he spent the afternoon at the Sixth Avenue branch, and dined with his partner.

"Be sure to get back by half-past seven," she had instructed Ralph, as he left the breakfast table, "I have a surprise for you."

"Surprise? What?"

"Never mind. But you get back by half-past seven."

"All rightie," he had replied, cheerfully.

The day had gone on as all Thursdays went on, quite as though she were not about to look again upon the face of the man who had all but knocked her life into bits.

"But eight years are eight years," she had kept thinking, all the time she was going about the routine; ordering the groceries; visiting the market; supervising, with Mrs.

Mellon who lived across the hall, the play of the children, from her customary bench at the end of Montague Street; chatting about this and that—how was old man Farrar's rheumatism, what was that swell recipe for tomato bisque, wasn't it annoying about the hot water being turned off Sunday, wasn't Dorothy Gish marvelous in "Nell Gwyn," and that black nightgown—well!—still, if you have a figure like that!—let's get up a party and go to Werba's new theater next Wednesday matinee. . . .

But as the afternon shadows deepened, her excitement had increased. She had dropped a cup and broken it, while she was scratching up her supper. Luckily, Sue had created a diversion by being rather fretful, had insisted upon assisting, and had made something of a mess in the kitchen. Further, she had set up an unusual objection to her carrots and spinach, and had only capitulated to a strenuous version of the eating-game, "Now a spoonful of elephants, Sue. Now a spoonful of wolves," reinforced by the promise of maple-syrup on the junket. Then the dishes had been washed, Sue handling the tea-towel. And at the precise moment that the last saucer was being put away, and Fanny was saying to herself, "Oh, dear! I'll have to speak to Emma again about the ice-box," the doorbell had rung violently, and a fluttering had started up in her throat.

For a moment she had stood, smoothing her hair back from her forehead, breathing deeply.

Then, "Silly!" she thought, and, in a flippant slang-term, "What have I got to lose?"

She grasped Sue's hand. Together they went to the door.

"Hello, George," she said at once, in a tone that belied completely the pounding in her temples.

(Now! He's here! What am I going to do!)

He entered. She saw a man heavier than she had known George, in a light gray plaid suit, cut not well, but "snappily"; his face not tanned as she had known it, but grayish, and deeply-lined.

(But—this is a stranger! He's changed so!)

"Hello, Fanny," George said, with a jauntiness that was hollow.

(Even his voice!)

"Well, well! Some dump you got here. Prosperous, hey?" he was saying; then, nervously, "Ain't you going to shake hands?"

She did not take his proffered hand. Instead, she said, "This is my Sue. Come here, Sue. Say hello to Cousin George."

She pulled the child from behind her.

"'Cousin' George. That's a good one! Haw, haw!" George laughed, with much more hilarity than the occasion called for. "Hello, Susie. How you was?"

But Sue hung back, and squirmed, staring at him solemnly, making no movement toward him.

"She doesn't like to be called Susie," Fanny explained, pleased somehow, "Now she'll have to get used to you."

"My mistake!" he said, grinning a trifle tautly. "Looks like you, don't she!"

"Everybody says she's got her father's eyes and mouth," Fanny announced. "Here, Sue. Quit squirming now, and sit down on Mamma's lap. Sit down yourself, can't you, George?"

"Sure, when I get ready," he answered, some of his old confidence of manner returning. "I want to look around. Yep. Some nice little dump you got."

"I'm glad you like it."

"Yep. You done fine, didn't you? You got hold of the right kind of a guy. I can tell."

"I'm sure he'll be pleased to know you approve."

"Get sarcastical, now. I ain't handin' him any flowers. I was just tellin' you how glad I am things are goin' fine with you. Gosh, you sure do look great yourself."

"Do I? Here, Sue. Stop that squirming."

He came close to her, and looked admiringly down into her eyes. "Do you! Baby, I sure was some picker!"

"Don't call me 'baby,' " she said.

"No?"

"No. What right have you got to get so familiar?"

"Yeh? All right, then, Fanny. You sure have got to be one good-lookin' dame."

"I suppose I've changed a lot."

"Huh. That's good too. As if you wasn't one of the prettiest kids that ever—"

"How can you remember that far back?" she interrupted.

"That's better," he said, "Gees, you're human after all. I was beginnin' to think you'd just went blah. Go ahead, now. Bawl me out."

"I don't want to bawl you out," she said, "I'm just not interested in compliments."

"Don't kid me, ba— Fanny."

"No honestly. Can't you talk about something else? Tell me what you've been doing."

"You ain't mad at me?" he persisted.

"No."

"You ain't sore at me for—well, I done you a dirty trick, Fanny."

"Not so dirty."

Here Sue interrupted. "I want to play," she said, gravely.

"All right. Go get your doll," Fanny replied.

"I can't find it."

"It's right in the top drawer. Here. I'll get it." She went quickly out of the room, returning to find George coaxing the child, who stood on one foot some distance from him, and stared at him.

"Come on, kid. I won't eat you up!" he was saying.

But the child silently stood behind a chair, shaking her head.

"Here's your doll," Fanny said, handing it to her.

Without a word, Sue took it to a far corner, sat down and talked to it in a low murmur.

"She ain't very friendly," George remarked.

"She is sometimes," Fanny said.

"She just picks on me, hey?"

"I don't know. She has her likes and dislikes."

"Same as her Momma."

"Oh, yes."

"And when her Ma don't like a person—"

"I didn't say I didn't like you."

"Well—do you?"

"What does it matter? I don't even know you any more."

"So you are sore."

"Not a bit. I told you just now what you did wasn't very dirty."

He nodded.

"Well, of course—sure. Remember what I said in the letter. I done right, so far's you're concerned, but—"

"Yes, and that's why I'm not mad."

"But wasn't you sore? Wasn't you ever?"

"Of course I was. You hurt me, all right. But then—you know. Time goes along, and it all turns out right. So."

"Sure. But I still don't see why you ain't sore, just the same."

"Oh, drop it, can't you? Tell me what's happened to you. Did you get married, too?"

"Me?"

"Why, yes. What about that French girl?"

"Her? Aw, that was a lot of baloney. She was just a little broad I was kiddin' along. I put that in the letter on purpose. You see, I had to make it strong. I was doin' it for your own good, baby." He was suddenly earnest.

"I told you not to call me 'baby'! Go on. Tell me about what happened. You never got married at all?"

"Say!" he said, "What's the matter with you? Don't you know I ain't the marryin' kind? Don't you know if they was anybody in the world I would of married, it was you? Don't you do me no justice at all?"

She was surprised that she was not so pleased at this outburst as she might have expected. Nevertheless, she was somewhat shaken, and put flippancy into her reply, "No. Why should I? Well, go ahead. You got out of the Marines, of course. But aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"Sure I am. That's somethin' I meant to say before. I ain't George Cary any more. See? I'm Bill Dudley."

"Bill Dudley? I'll have to try and remember that."

"Yeh. Don't call me George in front of people, will you."

"I'm not likely to call you anything."

"No? Oh, I see. Well, you never can tell. Anyways, it worked out perfect. I find a stiff that was about my size, see? In a shell hole. His face was blowed all to hell. His clothes was tore, too. Well, it was night, see? So I just traded uniforms with him, and slips my identification tag on him. He was a doughboy. I thrun his away. So then I

put on a act for 'em. I wanders into another outfit, and pretended I lost my memory. Shell-shock, see?"

"That's when you were 'missing,' I suppose."

"Oh, was I missin'? I thought they'd find the stiff with the identification tag right away, and report I was dead."

"They reported you dead, later," she said, shortly.

"Sure. Well, then. This was a ordnance outfit, and I made out I couldn't remember nothin', so they put me in the hospital, and maybe I didn't have a couple of scares, because some guy that reckonized me might of turned up. But I got the breaks, see? So there I was, two months, livin' the life of Riley and doin' bunk fatigue, and then I commenced to get better. That was account a pretty little nurse. She wouldn't have nothin' to do with me while I was goofy. So I commenced to get my memory back. I was Bill Dudley, see? But still I couldn't remember what outfit. But I got a little bit better every day, and the nurse—well, never mind. So then the Doc, he was sore at me hornin' in on his girl, so he gets me fired out, and stuck in the Twenty-eighth. It was a doughboy outfit, and I had a couple of weeks of it right at the end of the big Push. And then a year in Germany after the Armistice—all the time me not belongin' there at all, but what did they care? That was fun, that German stuff. So then I got discharged there. And I went over to England, and—well, I seen the world, to make a long story short—"

"So you're Bill Dudley?"

"Yep. And what do you think I'm doin' now?"

She looked him over carefully. Then she replied, sarcastically, "Bootlegger, I suppose."

"That ain't such a comic remark as you seem to think for,"

he said, seriously, "Two or three times I been thinkin' of takin' up that racket. But I got one that pays almost as good, and just as excitin', but you don't get bumped off, see?"

"Oh—I never thought you'd come to the point where *you'd* admit you were afraid of anything."

"I ain't afraid. But say, when you dodged bullets as long as I have—well, the game I'm in, I can satisfy the old itchin' foot, and still I don't get in no gun-play. It's minerals. You know—for paints and drugs."

"Oh, I see. Smuggling dope."

"No, it ain't, neither. It's a big company in England, that goes out after mineral deposits, see? Like potash, and—well, it'd take too long to explain. Anyways, suppose they hear about some sort of stuff they want to get hold of, down in South America, say, or Africa. Well, they send me and an expert. I do the organizin' of the trip, and run it, and the expert does the lookin' it over. I'm learnin' a lot, too. I'm gradually workin' in on the business end."

She mocked him. "So—you're just a business man."

"Not a bit. We had some pretty dangerous times, oncet a while. Say, a year ago, down in Nicaragua—boy, when them Marines started to get sent in, maybe I didn't flag my neck out of there! Them spiggoties was beginnin' to make it hot, too. Naw, it ain't any settlin' down, but it brings in the jack. I'm livin' pretty swell these days. Look at the set of threads." He glanced down at his suit, and smoothed it out.

"I don't think I could miss seeing it," she said.

"Don't you like it?" he was anxious.

"I liked your uniform better," she replied, emphatically.

"Yeh—well—them days is gone forever."

"Lots of things have gone forever," she said.

"Have they?" he said, slowly. He kept his eyes on hers.

She turned to her daughter. "Come on, Sue. It's time to get undressed. Come on."

"Have they?" he repeated.

She rose, quickly, pulled her daughter to her feet. "Come along, honey. Get undressed."

"But I want my story!" Sue whined.

"You'll get your story, dear. Come along, now. Get undressed first."

"I'll be back in a minute," she said to George. She led Sue from the room.

George pulled out a cigarette, lighted it, and sat down. He followed her appreciatively with his eyes.

Meanwhile, Fanny was undoing Sue's shoe-laces. And she was thinking deeply. She was immensely puzzled. This George that she saw—he was indeed "Bill Dudley." Like a caricature of the George she had known. Some of his charm remained—but it was all so different. His hands looked—pudgy. He wasn't nearly as handsome any more. And yet—ought she not to send him away, now? Wouldn't Ralph misunderstand, be jealous—hurt, even? What did George want? Why had he come back at all? But—she hadn't laid him out, yet. She must give him a small taste of what she had gone through. Yet—could she penetrate his self-satisfaction? And did she really want to? He had done her a great service, after all, by disappearing. Here she had a home, as nice as anybody could want; a sweet child, a good husband—life was pleasant, and peaceful, and steady. Steady. That was it. And George still wandering—even though his wanderings were prosperous. Too prosperous.

"I wonder how much money he makes," she was thinking as she returned to the room, "Not as much as Ralph, I bet."

He was standing, looking out the window, when she entered.

"I might of known you'd have that view," softly.

She caught her breath.

"Same old buildings over there—and some new ones. Gees, they sure are pretty, all right, all right. Remember the way you used to rave about 'em?"

She mastered herself. "Did I?" she replied, lightly.

"Did you!" He turned suddenly, "Aw, baby—don't it all come back?"

"I told you not to call me—that! Now, if you can't stop—"

"All right, Fanny. I didn't even think about it. Now lemme ask you one question. Just one. Are you happy?"

"Certainly I am!"

"Honest?"

"Honest."

He looked at her. "Well, that's all I wanted to know." He sat down. "Tell me about it. What do you do all the time?"

"Oh, plenty of things." She, too, took a seat, on the other side of the room from him.

"What?"

"Oh, I run the house, and look after Sue, and there's the Friday bridge club, and I have lots of friends—"

"You have?" he interrupted, "That's somethin' new."

"What do you mean?" she said, indignantly.

"Why, you used to keep to yourself, most of the time."

"Oh. Well, I'm different, now."

"Yeh. Well, go on."

"There's not much else. We go to shows, and have a grand time."

He shook his head, looking at her. "Yeh. And this guy you married, what's he like?"

"You'll see."

"He treats you good, I can see that. Did I ever run acrost him?"

"I think you met Ralph, didn't you?"

"Him!"

"Well, what have you got to say about him?"

"Wasn't he that sort of goofy kid I run into a couple of times—tryin' to get out of the draft?"

"He certainly wasn't trying to get out of the draft!" she said with indignation, "If you can't be decent—"

"Oh—I didn't mean nothin'. I was just thinkin' out loud. So you married him, did you. Well, well. Wasn't he goin' to be a musician, or somethin' like that?"

"He played the violin, if that's what you mean."

"Yeh. I suppose he's quite a artist now. That's where he gets the dough for all these kind of things."

"No. He doesn't play any more at all. He hasn't time. He's the head of a big musical instrument shop, and that takes up his time. He's even got a branch, over in New York."

"Yeh? That's pretty good, ain't it."

"It certainly is."

"Yeh." His eyes studied her, he looked out the window sidewise, then back at her. "So you're happy with him."

"Yes, I told you."

"Never get—restless?" his voice became a shade insinuating, "Never feel like you was sort of—tied down?"

"No."

"Not a bit?"

"Not a bit."

"Don't ever want to go wanderin'—like you used to talk about to me?"

"We went to Canada last summer. If business keeps up like it is now, Ralph says we can go over to France for a month next year. Oh, don't you ever think you're the only one that goes places."

"I s'pose not," he said, thoughtfully.

There was silence for a moment.

"How's the old lady?" he asked, finally.

"She's fine."

"She's a corker!" he said, and chuckled, "I sure would like to see her sometime. She's a deep one, all right."

"Well—go over and see her."

"I will. And that egg brother of yours—he get hanged yet?"

"He's doing very well in the Gotham Chain Shops."

"No! Well, who'd of thunk it! Well, well."

Another silence. He was again the one to break it, changing his mood.

"Fanny. It's all gone, is it?"

"What?"

"You know what."

She trembled a little. But she answered firmly, "You mean—what I felt about you?"

He nodded.

She frowned.

"No foolin'—tell me the truth, baby."

She did not notice the "baby." She was much too intent upon figuring the situation out herself. She was amazed that it was, indeed, gone.

"Yes, it is, George," she said, very seriously, "It's gone."

"Are you sorry?"

"Sort of. I don't know. I'm glad, too, of course. But—I didn't think—"

"I felt it, all right. The second I come into the room. You know why I come over here?"

She made no remark, as he stopped speaking and looked at her.

"I'll tell you straight, I wanted to see. I done a lot of thinkin' about you, baby. All these years. I didn't forget you. I tried to, sure. Plenty of women, yeh. But they wasn't much. Lots of times I been terrible sorry, thinkin' what a sap I was to pass you up. Yeh."

He stared moodily down at his shoes.

"I only been back in America once before, after I got this job. Think of it—four years I been in the same job! Can you believe it? The other time, it was only for a day or so. And I was scared to look you up then. I was feelin' guilty still, see? But this time, I got to thinkin' on the ship. 'She was different,' I says to myself. 'She was different. I got to see her.' So I come over. And I was hopin', kind of— 'Well, I got some dough, now. Maybe she might forgive me, see? Maybe—' but then I seen you. And I knowed right away it was a pipe-dream."

"Of course it was," she said, thoughtfully.

"Even if things wasn't like they are—I mean, if you was free, and didn't have no home and a kid, and all that junk—it's gone, ain't it?"

"Yes."

He drew a deep breath. "Why?"

"I don't know. It just is."

"Did I hurt you too much—then?"

"Oh, yes. You hurt me. But even that wouldn't count, I don't suppose."

"What is it, then?"

"I don't know. It's you, partly."

"Did I change so much?"

"Yes."

"How?"

She looked at him, intently. "Do you really want to know?"

He grinned, feebly. "It must be terrible. But go ahead, shoot."

"You're—you're old, George. And not just years. You're—well, I don't know how to say it, exactly. I used to think about you as if you were something bright, and shiny, and new. Now—it's like you were second-hand. Shop-worn. Worn out."

"Nothin' romantical about the old guy now, hey?"

"You just seem like a stranger—a tired, old stranger. That's a fact. Those clothes, for instance. And you're—heavy!"

"Yeh? Heavy? Do you think if I should put on the old uniform, and run around the block every day—"

"No, no." She smiled, sadly, "That's only part of it. You're—I guess you're getting heavy all the way through. Not just your body."

"Naw, you're right, baby. I been around too much. I seen too much. And none of it was real."

A brief silence.

"Still and all, I dunno if I would of liked it real any better. I mean, if this here is real." He waved his hand vaguely, including the room, Fanny, all her surroundings.

"It *is* real. It is!" she said.

"Yeh, I guess so. And look what it's done to you."

"Oh. You're going to get back at me, are you?"

"No, no," he said, wearily, "Why should we try to be mean

to each other? I don't believe you was bein' mean on purpose, what you was tellin' me. Here we are, a couple of old people, talkin' it over."

"Oh—so now I'm old, am I?"

"Well, maybe not the years. You sure look fresh and pretty, like I said. And you ain't thirty, are you?"

"Twenty-nine. You ought to remember that much, anyhow."

"Yeh, twenty-nine. I thought that was it. But you know, you got it, too. I mean, you ain't a kid any more. You're set, see? Fixed in your ways. I didn't think you ever would be that way, but there you are, as old as me. Just a wife and a mother, that's all."

"Isn't that enough?"

"For you—sure. Only it ain't the Fanny I used to know. That's all I'm tryin' to say. You're set, see? You're just what you're goin' to be, till you die."

"Well, I'm glad of it."

"And that's the worst about it. You see, before I come, I thought maybe you'd still feel about me sort of—well—you know. Spite of all I done. And if you wasn't happy—I thought, maybe I might sort of take you away."

"Oh, you did! That's funny! Just funny! That's all I can say about it."

"Sure. I can get a laugh out of it, too. I ain't any whiz myself, maybe. But you see, the Fanny I knowed was full of life, and fire, and ideas. You—all you're full of is housekeepin', and bridge-clubs, and steak."

She laughed.

"Yeh, it's funny," he continued, "It's god-damn funny that life runs along, and takes away your pep, and makes you careful. Even me, I'm careful. I started gettin' careful when

I passed you up. Instead of takin' a chance anyways, and maybe runnin' away from you afterwards."

She said, very sincerely, "I've always known you did it mostly because you didn't want to hurt me worse, George. That's why I forgave you long ago."

"Oh—don't gimme too much credit. A lot of it was because I didn't want the trouble of ditchin' you. It was a lot easier when I was 'way off there, than if we'd been hitched up, and I'd of had to beat it, leavin' you maybe havin' to look after a kid. Anyways, here we are, just talkin' it over, talkin' it over. That's where most things end up—chewin' the fat."

He turned away from her toward the window, out which he looked. Just then, Sue appeared in the doorway, dressed in her nightgown.

"You promised the story, Mamma!" she said reproachfully.

"Of course I did! Come here, sweetheart!"

The child ran to her, climbed in her lap.

"What shall I tell you about?"

"He puff'n he blew!" Sue answered at once, with enthusiasm.

"But I told you that one last night, and the night before. Can't I tell you a new one?"

"He puff'n he blew!" Sue repeated querulously.

"No, look, darling. Let mother tell you another story, just this once. We can try it, anyway. Then if you don't like it, I'll tell you 'he puffed and he blew.' How's that?"

"No, mamma!" there were threats of tears in her voice.

Fanny kept her eyes fixed triumphantly upon George, as she persisted, "Don't want to hear about the little princess

with the long, golden hair? That slept and waited for the knight to come riding—"

"No!" Sue wailed, "P-puff 'n he blew!"

"Now, now! Don't cry. Here, I know. Let nice Cousin George tell you a story. He can tell you lots of stories about places far, far away. Oh, he tells such nice stories!"

"That's a dirty trick," George said, glowering at Fanny.

"No!" Sue howled. She commenced to cry.

"She only likes these silly ones," Fanny said, with a look of satisfaction. Then, "All right, honey. He puffed and he blew. Now, don't cry."

The child calmed immediately, and sat open-mouthed as Fanny began. George watched, silently, his expression one of sardonic disgust.

"Once upon a time there were three little pigs, and they had three little houses. The first little pig's house was straw, and the second little pig's house was mud, and the third little pig's house was brick. And a bear came along, and he said to the first little pig—what did he say?"

The child answered with alacrity, "'I'll puff 'n I'll blow and I'll puff 'n I'll blow, and I'll blow your house down.'"

"So then," continued Fanny, "The first little pig said, 'Go ahead, old Bear! You can't hurt my house!' So what did the Bear do?"

"He puff 'n he blew, and he puff 'n he blew, and he blew the house down!" Sue announced, with tremendous gusto.

"So he ate the little pig, and he went to the house of the second little pig," Fanny took up the thread.

The demolition of the second unfortunate pig's domicile, and his absorption by the voracious bear was gone through, accompanied by the delighted chorus of the child. Followed the bear's attempt upon the third little pig, and his thwart-

ing, because the house, being built of brick, was too strong to fall down.

"So then," finished Fanny. "The bear came down the chimney. But the third little pig had a big tub of hot water on the hearth, and the bear fell right in it. And he was scalded to death. And then what happened?"

"Third little pig took a great big knife, and cut him open!" Sue declaimed, with squeals of delight, "And the other two little pigs ran out, and they all ate the old bear up!"

"Now, isn't that a fine story?" Fanny asked of George.

"She sure is bloodthirsty," he replied.

"I suppose so," Fanny said, meaningfully, "But then—maybe it's safer."

"Yeh?" George said, gloomily.

"Uppity-uppity!" Fanny said to Sue, lifting her into her arms, "Say good-night to the nice man."

"Good-night," Sue said, dutifully, but without enthusiasm.

"I sure do rate high with her," George commented.

There was the sound of a key in the lock. Ralph came in, carrying in his hand a storage battery. He halted, and looked inquiringly at George.

"This is the surprise, Ralph," Fanny said. "You remember George, don't you?"

Ralph was somewhat taken aback. "George? You mean—"

But George was equal to the situation. With a heartiness which had the ring of sincerity, he said, "Sure! The old defeated rival. Thought I'd drop up and see how things were going. Glad to see you." He held out his hand.

Ralph gripped it uncertainly.

"Been over in Europe all this time. Just had to look up

Fanny, and see how she was. She sure looks grand, I'll say. Shows she's happy, all right."

"We've been laughing over how crazy I was about him once," Fanny added, smiling maliciously.

"And I was tellin' her how lucky she was that she didn't grab off a bum like me," George said, taking his medicine, "Some great little place you got here."

Ralph began to thaw. "Yeh, it is nice."

"And some swell youngster!" George continued, "Say, she's a winner. Didn't cotton to me much, but she sure is cute."

"She don't take to strangers much," Ralph said, trying not to show his satisfaction.

"It's time she was in bed," Fanny said. "Kiss Papa good-night, dear."

While Sue embraced her father, Fanny talked. "George isn't George any more, Ralph. He's Bill Dudley. Make him tell you about it. And he's only in town a couple of days. He's on his way to Australia."

"Is that so?" Ralph asked. "I got an uncle lives in Sydney. Frank Sloan. Ever hear of him?"

"Not yet," George smiled, "I never been there yet."

"Well, you must look him up," Ralph said, "Have a cigar?"

"No, thanks. I stick by the old Luckies. What you got there?"

"New 'B' battery. Know anything about radios?"

"Surest thing you know," George said, heartily, "Carry a portable with me all the time. Got a German one at home—special-built—"

Fanny groaned inwardly, as she turned away, and took

her daughter to the bedroom. She tucked her in, kissed her, and went to the bureau. She examined, in the looking-glass, her face. Hardly a crow's-foot. Still young, apparently, as George had said. Yes, and prettier than when he knew her. But there was something—yes, there was. Something settled. Something placid, and "set."

She smoothed her hair, smiling a little sadly. Ralph—he was "heavier," too. George would laugh about that, afterwards. But it became Ralph. He was handsomer than he'd ever given any promise of being. Handsomer, if the truth were told, than George.

"But not handsomer than when—" she started thinking, then checked herself. Nothing disloyal, now.

She turned out the light and went into the sitting-room.

They were tinkering with the radio, George fastening a wire, Ralph turning one of the dials.

"Yeh, give me a super-heterodyne every time," George was saying, enthusiastically, "There ain't practically no static, and I get stations all over Europe."

"This here is a five-tube Neutrodyne," Ralph said, in a defensive tone, "And I get everything this side of the Rockies."

"Sure, sure," George was conciliatory, "They're a good rig. But sometime you try one of them like I told you. It's sweeter, know what I mean?"

Fanny, unnoticed, walked to the window, and looked out it. Across the river, the lights gleamed and twinkled in her fairy city.

"You won't believe me," she heard George saying, "But one night when I was down in Nicaragua, I got a jazz-band, and what do you think it was?"

"New Orleans?"

"New Orleans—nix! WEAF! Sure as God made little apples!"

A drift of smoke veiled the towers for a moment, floated across the Woolworth like a scarf.

(Oh, magic city, city of my dreams!)

"I understand there's a set somethin' like mine," George's voice boomed on, "The Freed-Eisman people make it."

(Two old people, chewing the fat. No—three!)

"I'm sure glad to know about it," Ralph's voice showed excitement, "Got that attached yet?"

"All Kayo."

"I'll just show you what this little old set can do. Wait'll I get you WGN, Chicago."

(There's the statue, down there in the little park. My knight on his milk-white steed—huh! George Washington, that's all it is, and a mighty sad-looking thing, at that. And all those years . . . But it's best to see true, see straight. Then you don't get hurt. . . .)

"Sure, I quit the old fiddle. Why should I scratch around on it, when I can get the real thing—there! Hear that? It's old Chi! Clear as a bell! Now, wait till I amplify it—"

(The princess lay sleeping, her long golden hair about her shoulders. . . .)

From the radio burst a loud volume of sound, a tenor voice, caroling full-blast:

"What does it mat-tuh—"

Fanny, endeavoring to stifle a yell of laughter which was mounting in her throat, choked, and coughed explosively.

"What's the trouble, kid?" Ralph asked, looking up, and frowning a trifle, despite the solicitude of his tone.

"Nothing. Nothing. Nothing at all," Fanny replied, "Except I was thinking, it's so loud. It might keep Sue awake."

"She'll sleep right through it," he said, "And I hate to tone it down. I want to show him it's as good as his. Don't you think it'll be all right?" he finished, anxiously.

She went to him, and held his hand. "Yes, of course," she said, "It's fine. It's beautiful! It's a wonder! Isn't it George!"

THE END

A NOTE ON THE TYPE IN WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET

The type in which this book has been set is Old Style No. 1. In design, the face is of English origin, by MacKellar, Smith and Jordan, and bears the workmanlike quality and freedom from "frills" characteristic of English old styles in the period prior to the introduction of the "modern" letter. It gives an evenly textured page that may be read with a minimum of fatigue.

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